UNKNOWN Worlds

25c DEC · 1941
FANTASY FICTION
DEC. '41

BIT OF TAPESTRY . . . . . Cleve Cartmill

The Predestinators pulled the strings that ruled the world—but three old maids could twitch or cut those strings—

THE HOUSE . . . . . Jane Rice

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SNULBUG . . . . . Anthony Boucher

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BRAT . . . . . Theodore Sturgeon

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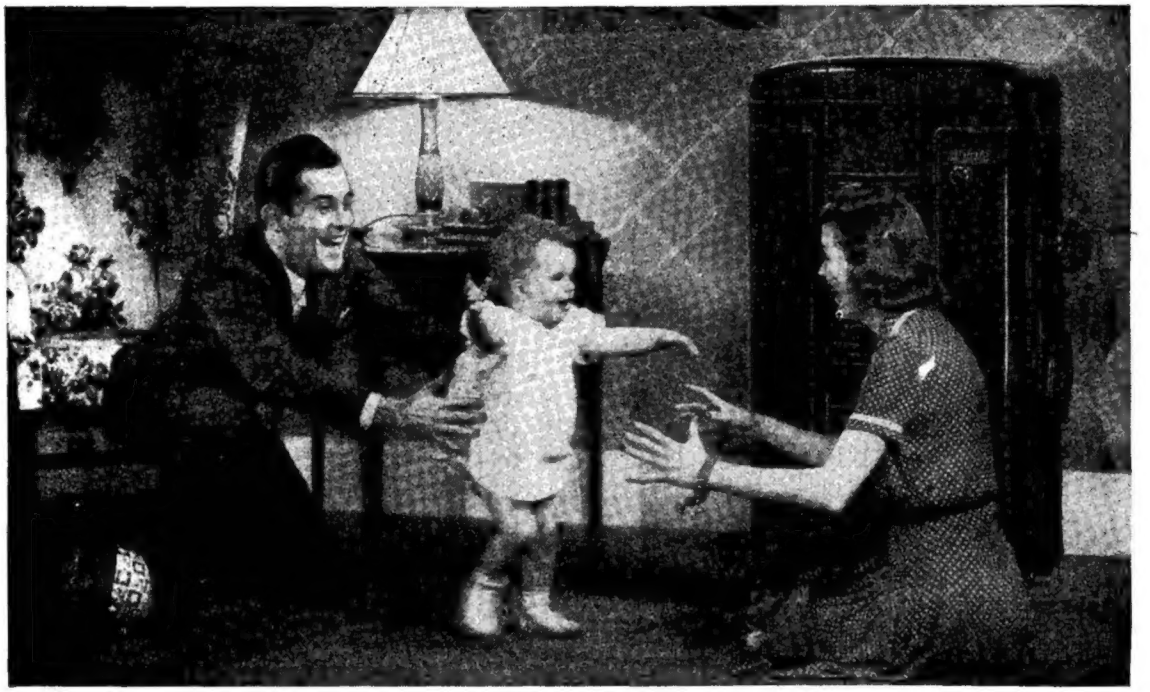

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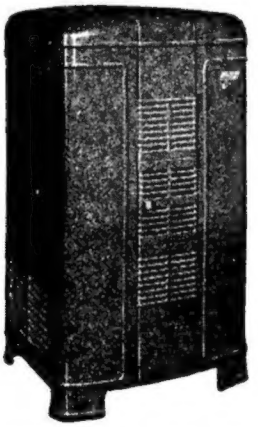

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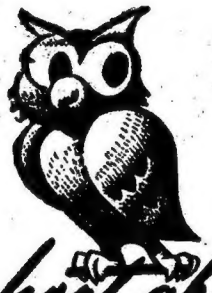

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AST—1N

UNKNOWN WORLDS

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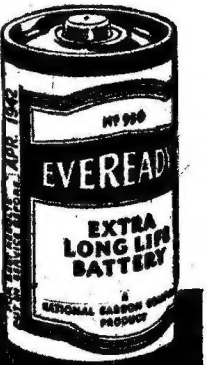

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OF THINGS BEYOND

I think there's room for an adequate thesis on the status of such entities as vampires, werewolves, demons and similar inhabitants of the Unknown Worlds with respect to the inventions of modern science. It has long been known, of course, that vampires and werewolves are invulnerable to any weapon save one made of pure silver—only silver bullets, swords or arrows could wound these unpleasant dwellers of the night. It was known, too, that vampires could not be seen in a mirror. But somehow I can't help wondering whether a camera—which forms an image in silver, the mystic metal—might or might not portray the image of a vampire. The recognized authorities on the subject of vampirism studied their subject before the camera was available, and hence left no writings on the subject.

Werewolves, too, are subject to the peculiar properties of silver; perhaps they would photograph—which would raise another question in turn. All students of lycanthropy are agreed that, when the were-beast has been slain by a silver weapon, the animal form changes back to the original human shape in death. Now if silver has this strange property, it might be impossible to get a good portrait sitting of a werewolf. The picture might reveal only the human, and not the lupine form. Perhaps special photographic plates using platinum salts instead of silver—there is no mention of the effect of platinum weapons on werewolves and vampires—would be necessary.

The sharpened incisors of the vampire are well known. But the case of a vampire with badly-cared-for teeth in need of filling might well be sad—as unfortunate as that of a diabetic who was allergic to insulin. For the standard silver amalgam of dentistry would almost certainly be fatal to his unusual metabolism.

Then, too, there are no reliable data on the reactions of these various creatures to X-ray bombardment. X-rays, in massive doses, are deadly to all ordinary life—but perhaps it would require X rays from a tube using a silver cathode to act on or treat a vampire?

The fact that neither vampire nor werewolf can bear the light of day, but revel in the light of the moon, suggests that they are hypersensitive to sunlight. Like some unfortunate human beings, they may, perhaps, acquire a fatal sunburn with even a brief exposure. Perhaps a vampire trap could be made with a few black-light ultraviolet bulbs? Sadly, no authority seems to have conducted research on this point.

Tradition has it that demons are more hardy fellows in one sense, and yet more sensitive in another. They come and go under the compulsion of certain sounds and—peculiar—perfumes. Such sensitive souls of evil would, one might think, be severely injured if only they could be summoned, prisoned in the proper geometrical figure, and then assaulted by the tireless voice of a good electrically powered phonograph.

Too, instead of making it necessary for the experimenter to learn for himself the exact intonation and pronunciation to make the evocation chants effective, records could be made and distributed. (There is, already, an excellent and interesting Victor record of an authentic Voodoo Papa-Lo's invocation chant available, by the way. Called "Erzulie," if you're interested.)

The modern abilities along the lines of synthetic chemistry should make the duplication of the necessary "perfume" substances possible, and assure a much more convenient source of supply.

One other point is brought to mind, too. It has long been known that cold iron had a bad effect on almost any and all forms of magic enchantment. The modern scientist knows that iron is unique among metals principally for the strength of its magnetic effects, and that, furthermore, only *cold* iron—the condition specifically mentioned in most references to its antimagical effects—is highly magnetic. It would seem almost certain that the falling off of magic and practitioners of black magic must be due to the rise of electricity, and the widespread use of electromagnetic devices of all sorts. It will be noticed by any observant student of the subject that magic and magicians continue to work widely today only in those regions of the world where the magnetically potent network of current-carrying electric wires has not yet penetrated.

Unquestionably, this, and this alone, can account for the distribution of practical functioning magic in the world today.

The Editor.

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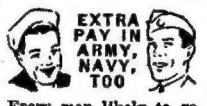

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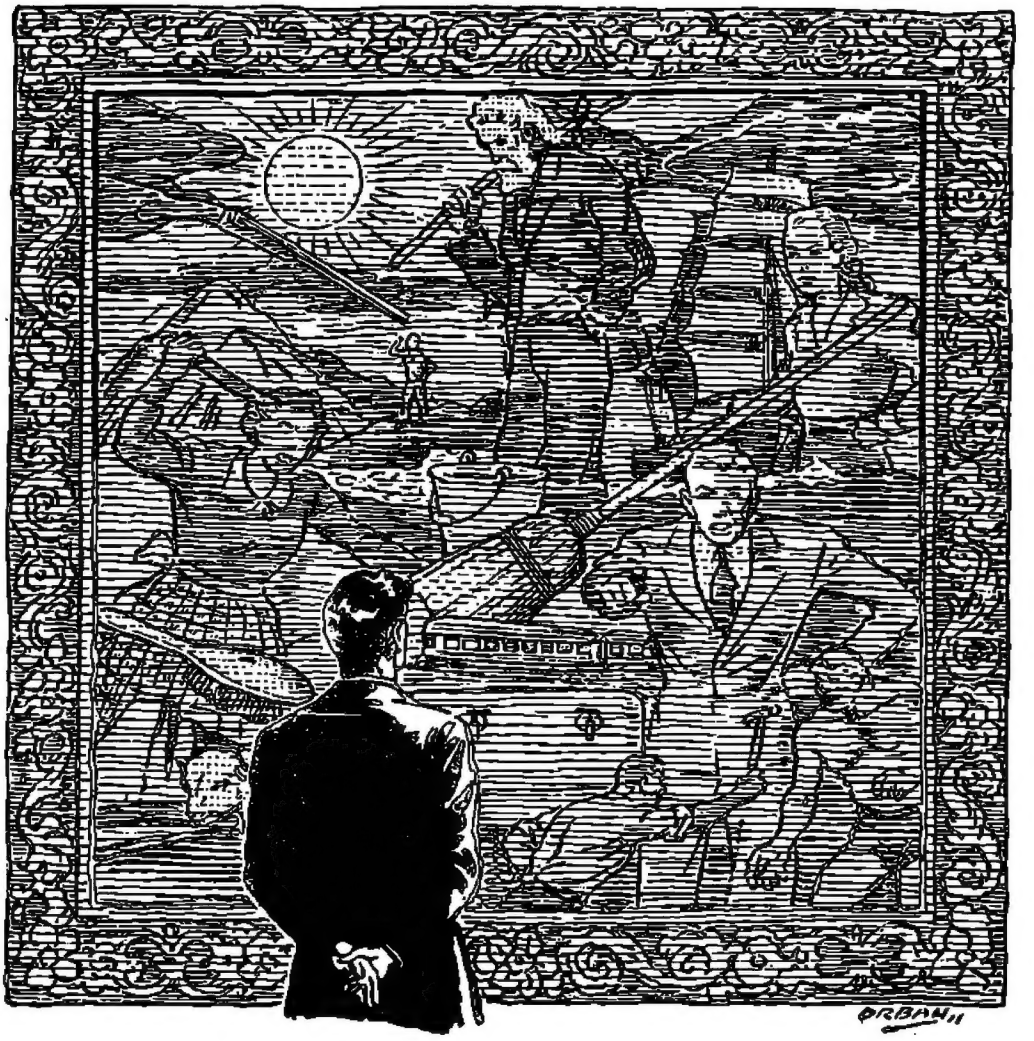

BIT OF TAPESTRY

By Cleve Cartmill

● Of an unimportant seeming man, the Planners, the great Plan—and three old maids who wove tapestries and interfered with all plans that ever were—

Illustrated by Orban

PROLOGUE

"Six are we, and she is one. Yet she lives. Is this the vaunted efficiency of the Predestinators? Tell me, Monitor."

"Millicent Lake lives, true, but no question of efficiency enters. Nor yet of reform. Your suggestions are not admissible. One phase only of the Plan have you seen brought to completion. A new member's attitude must be retiring."

"But tell me, Monitor. She lives, and Phase Three has failed, which I have also seen. Is this efficiency?"

"I tell you this. We performed our duties, as outlined by the Planners."

"But that human being lives, a symbol of our failure. Now it is too late for success."

"Here is the tapestry, the new Plan of Phase Three."

"To fail again? Tell me, Monitor."

"It shall not. It cannot."

"Ah? With multiple operations, a double suicide, a death timed by human split seconds? It is more complex than the failure. It is more complex than patterns woven by the Fates."

"You dare? You dare?"

"To mention the Three Sisters? Yes, for the Predestinators, for whom we administrate destiny, have failed as badly as they. Plan B is two human centuries behind schedule. As an associate Predestinator, I have the right to suggest a way to success."

"You have no rights. You have orders only to obey. Yet, if the other members have no objections, heard you shall be this once. None? Proceed, newest member."

"Very well. Regard the tapestry. Homer and Martha Curtain become insane and kill themselves. Rumor has it throughout the town that their only son, Webb, has inherited their insanity. He becomes preoccupied and unhappy enough to step in front of a car in the course of his duties as a filling-station attendant and is killed; accidentally, according to human standards. Court Masters, driver of the car, is charged with manslaughter; nonetheless, and must pay his attorney with the contents of his brief case, for he has no money. The brief case, on which the entire success of this substitute Plan for Phase Three depends, goes roundabout through the hands of Lorimer Grach to H. William Karp. One step would suffice, and my suggestion is that Court Masters, who now has the brief case, deliver it directly to H. William Karp."

"Do you imply a criticism of the Planners?"

"I do not, Monitor. My suggestion is respectful. I ask a petition for simplification."

"We have heard the suggestion. We shall now pass on to other matters."

"I demand more consideration, Monitor. The Three Sisters will find a way to defeat us again if we do not strike quickly and directly."

"You have twice sullied this meeting."

"I shall continue to mention the Fates. Did they not prevent the death of Millicent Lake, the success of Phase Three? Are they in control of that human now? Tell me, Monitor."

"They are not. Millicent Lake functions under free will, and shall continue until her actions affect those humans now involved in Phase Three. In such event, a member of this board will assume human form and provide her with a legacy from a relative."

"And so bring her back into control. True, Monitor, but this Plan is too fallible. Regard the tapestry again. As Millicent Lake escaped our control, so might any represented there. What good to bring them back, when the Plan has failed?"

"It shall not fail again."

"By the stars, how prevent it? The Sisters still have their power, they have contempt for us, they are mad."

"They have power only through personal contact with human beings. This plan is laid far from the previous failure. They know nothing of it."

"They have ways of knowing, Monitor. If Homer and Martha Curtain fail to commit suicide, then we have failed."

"In that event, I shall go to Earth and direct Phase Three to a successful end."

"Remember, the private destinies of all humanity are involved. Remember, Monitor. When you are in human form, you are restricted physically. You may offer only a limited number of jobs, give so many legacies, or any other means of bringing human beings back into control. If you are a man, you may perform only a certain number of tasks in a given length of human time."

"We will not fail. Homer and Martha Curtain shall die. Else the whole purpose of the Predestinators having displaced the Thr . . . er, the whole purpose of our having brought order into the administration of human destiny is destroyed."

I.

The girl stood in the living-room doorway and looked at the boy who sat and stared out the window at nothing. Her dark eyes were steady and troubled, hands loose at her sides, thumbs stroking her blue skirt at a point halfway between knee and thigh. She was not aware of this abstract, nervous motion.

Then, with a fixed pleasantness, she crossed the room and put a hand on Webb Curtain's blond hair.

"You can come out of your shell now."

His eyes tilted up, his mouth down. "Leave me alone, Kay."

"Life goes on. You know?"

"Why?" he grated.

"Stop it, Webb! You'll make yourself sick. A week of this is enough." She made a move toward pulling him out of his chair. "You've got to get outside. Come on, let's go riding. Or something."

"Where people can look at me?"

"Well, what are you going to do? Ye gods, you act like Camille!"

"I'm going away. Tonight."

"Where?"

"What does it matter?"

She took her hands off his arm, stepped back a pace, and said quietly, "It matters to me."

"Why?"

"So I'll know what kind of clothes to take, Webb."

His slanted mouth formed a slow, sad smile. "Sweet little Kay. It's much better that you forget me."

Her eyelids drooped in quick fury. Then she sighed and waggled her head. "Here we go again, boys," she said. "Look, Webb, quit dramatizing yourself. And quit patronizing me. Where you going, and why?"

"Wherever Fate leads me. I can't stay here after what happened."

Kay Loring made a slow tour of the room, fingering objects without seeing what she touched: a powdery rose drooping on a split stem, a loving cup on the mantel which she and Webb had won in a dancing contest, the faded lace antimacassars on the sofa arms, lace tidies on the big chairs.

She felt that a crisis impended, a crisis in Webb Curtain's life—perhaps in hers. If he ran away from such whispers as existed in the little town, and others which he imagined, what would it do to his courage, his bright gibes? And what would it do to her?

She stood before him again, one hand on her hip, the other loosely clenched at her side. She spoke with quiet and measured contempt, a faint curl at one corner of her generous mouth.

"Maybe it's better you go away. Maybe it's better, Webb. Some place else, maybe, you won't have trouble. And if you do, you can run away again. You can always run away. You're a good runner. You know? And when you run as far as you can, you can cry. Crying ought to come easy to you. You got a good start."

He got to his feet and stared down at her through narrowed lids. "I'm not afraid, see. If I have to stay here awhile to prove it to you, O. K., but I'm not afraid. I'm not running away. People shy away from me, because of what mother and dad did. That's what I want to get away from. I don't like to be reminded of it. But if you think I'm scared, I'll show you."

She grinned. There was a touch of tenderness in it.

"Then I think you're scared, if it'll keep you here."

His jaw line tilted up an inch. "Watch me, then. I'll get a job somewhere. Today. And if anybody wants trouble, they can have it."

"Now *don't* go around with a chip on your shoulder."

"What the devil do you expect me to do, bow from the hips to everyone I meet and say, 'Yes, I'm nuts. Silly, isn't it?'"

"No, but the tougher you get the tougher it'll be for you."

"Don't worry about me. I'll do all right."

When the first housewife looked up from weeding a flowerbed and nodded coldly, Webb's shoulders squared belligerently. He had often stopped to pass the time of day across the picket fence of Mrs. Jenkins, but now that his mother and father were double suicides, she nodded coldly.

The incident was repeated several times as he hurried stiffly along the street green with May trees. By the time he was within a block of the main business district, Webb's eyes were a trifle glassy with fury. His hands were fists in his coat pockets; he wanted to swing on a chin—any chin.

A group of little boys and girls eyed him solemnly from the front lawn of a small cottage. They watched him approach, with the inscrutability of seven-year-olds, their heads swiveled as one as he passed, their fat hands stilled on toys. When he had passed, one called after him:

"Hello, crazy man."

Webb caught his breath and whirled. His blazing eyes stopped their giggles; the set of his shoulders caused them to edge away. Though he didn't move, they felt his concentrated hate and scattered like squealing pigs. Webb stared after them, shrugged, and went on.

In the office of the daily *Sentinel* he was received by a paper-shuffling Pat Cain. Instead of his usual crisp heartiness, the huge editor showed intense interest in a sheaf of copy paper. He shuffled it in his enormous hands, and bent his massive head over local and national news stories.

"Pat," Webb said, "I need a full-time job. Will you put me to work?"

Pat Cain's flinty eyes did not raise from the top sheet on his desk. "Sorry, Curtain. I don't have a vacancy."

"But, Pat! Two weeks ago you said you'd make a place."

"Conditions have changed, Curtain."

Webb Curtain's mouth set in a sullen, drooping arc. "I didn't expect this of you, Cain. The others, yes, but not you. You seemed to have some sense. Conditions have changed, eh? With me, you mean. So you're like the others, hm-m-m?"

Cain's eyes flicked upward. "I'm not going to quarrel with you."

"For three years," Webb sneered, "you have taught me how to write news stories. You've spent time every day during college vacations

drumming honesty and fairness into me. Tell it the way you see it, you say. I thought you were somebody. I thought you were almost God. And now you weasel on me, like the others. You see a taint in me, or pretend to. It's not! Am I to blame for the weakness of my parents? You know damned well I'm not crazy. I don't know where the rumor started that it's congenital in my family, but it's just a rumor. Give me a job, Pat! I've got to have it!"

Cain's eyes softened a fraction, the muscles around his broad mouth loosened. "I'm sorry, Webb. I'm—damned sorry. Try somewhere else."

"That's just dandy."

Webb stamped out into the morning sun. Try somewhere else. Try.

Eagan's Department Store: "Sorry."

Michaelson's Grocery: "Full up."

Eagle Hotel: "Bellhop? Not here."

Raeburn Feed Mill: "Nope."

The Greek's: "Don' needa no dishwash."

The Gem Theater, Hilton's Hardware, K & T Lunch, The Bon Marché Chocolattery, Runt's Pool Hall, Sherry's Drug & Sundries, Midwest Garage, Ozark Cleaners, National Shirt Factory:

"Sorry."

Red Dog Mining Co., Cunningham Photos, Raddington Machinery, Hobe's Smithy:

"Sorry."

Webb Curtain to Webb Curtain: "That's the works. So charity begins at home. My fellow citizens, my friends. The subject of this evening's chat is, 'He's a jolly good fellow whom everybody denies.' There's a train whistle. Well. Why say good-by?"

He was at the railroad-station ticket window, money in his hand, order on the tip of his tongue when he was hailed by Larry Owen, who lumbered in like an earnest Great Dane.

"Webb! Wait a minute! What are you doing, Webb?"

Webb turned and grinned into Larry's wide, serious blue eyes. "Doing? Why, I was just going. No place in particular. Why?"

"I been looking all over, Webb. They said you'd be here, so I came hurrying."

"They?"

"Yeah. The Parker sisters. Moved into that big corner house at State and Lexington. Anyway, you want a job and you've got one."

The evening streamliner shuffed to a stop outside, and Webb divided a glance between it and the patient ticket seller behind the wicket.

"On the level?" he asked Larry.

"Sure, Webb. In the filling station right across from the Parker sisters. Let the train go, Webb."

"All right." To the ticket agent: "Let the train go. Come on, Larry. What goes?"

Larry led the way to the roadster parked next to the town's single taxicab operated by Horace Beecham.

"I dropped in for some gas, Webb, and Brad Hunley says he's leaving town and he recommended you a week or so ago for the job. The O. K. came through today from the head office, and Brad says the job is yours, specially after the scummy way you got treated today."

Larry had a flair for fine, hard driving, and they slid along Main Street as a blurred reflection in plate-glass show windows.

"What about these women?" Webb asked.

"The Parker sisters? Well, after Brad told me, I said I'd try to find you, and started to leave. I heard a yell from across the street, and there on the porch was a thin old dame in black satin and white lace, calling me by name. I went over and she says she heard us talking."

"Over that State highway traffic?"

"Yeah, that's what I asked her. But she says there was a lull. All I thought was it must have been one hell of a lull. Anyway, she says you were here, about to scram; so I tore over, and here we are."

"Aren't we, though!"

As Larry slowed to turn into the filling station, Webb wore a helpless, though grateful smile. Funny, he thought, how things happen. He'd been on the crumbling brink of despair, had given up, admitted the situation was too big. Out of a clear sky a job had dropped.

"Hi, Webb."

Brad Hunley stuck out a bronze hand and bared even teeth.

"Thanks a lot, Brad."

"Don't mention it. Can you start to work in the morning?"

"Now, if it's helpful."

"No need. I'm about to shut her down. Come in. I'll show you what you need to know."

While Brad explained the simple mechanical duties of the station attendant, Larry stood by with an amiable and paternal smile. Indulgent. Webb was Larry's idol, and he had served when service had been needed.

"By the way," Brad said in conclusion, "the old ladies who moved in across there today want to open a tourist home. They'll take in acceptable strays, and they want to make a deal with you to do a little baggage smashing. You'll have plenty of time, it'll be a little pocket money, and you can charge their transients a parking fee to use the lot at night. Better run across and see 'em."

"O. K. Thanks again, Brad. Have a good trip. Write to me."

Webb yanked the bell pull of the big gabled house, and a mellow note rang inside. Presently the oak door swung in to reveal a tall, thin

woman in long black satin, white lace collar and cuffs which matched her hair. Old gentility gone neatly to seed, Webb thought. She stared slightly above and to the left of him and said sharply:

"Well, who is it? Can't you see I'm blind?"

"I didn't notice, ma'am. I'm sorry. This is Webb Curtain."

"Oh, yes. Come in, Webb."

He was amazed at the familiarity with which this blind woman walked the dim hallway. She touched the tapestried walls now and then with fingertips, but she edged around a settee, a hall tree, and an ancient-looking chest with all the natural grace of a finishing-school graduate with excellent eyesight.

He was no less amazed at her sisters, and at the parlor which appeared to have been lived in for a lifetime. It seemed almost incredible that such neatness could be achieved in the few hours they had occupied the house.

Every pin seemed in its own place on the sewing table beside an old spinning wheel in the corner. Each tapestry on the wall seemed especially made for the space it occupied, and the wide sweep of pageantry on these pieces imparted an old and solid feeling to the room. Knitting needles and skeins of yarn looked competent in a red and yellow basket. And the marble-topped table against the front wall held an organized litter of twigs, a tiny hourglass, and a miniature crystal ball cupped in the hands of what appeared to be a crystal goddess.

He saw these objects in a slow, sweeping glance. Their neatness, their order, came to him later, for at the moment of entry the other two sisters turned their faces to him. He felt a sense of shock to see that these faces were exact copies of the one who had met him at the door.

"This is my sister Margaret," said his hostess. "She is blind in one eye, but cannot hear at all. When you speak to her, be sure she can see your lips. Otherwise she can't tell what you're saying. The other is my sister Gertrude, who is both blind and deaf. Don't bother to be polite to her, as she can't tell. I'm Emily."

"I won't ever be able to tell you apart," Webb said.

"That's not important," Miss Margaret said. "Well, Emily, my land! Give the boy a chair. Tell him what we want with him."

"Quiet, Margaret. There is time enough. Sit down, Webb. We have a simple business proposition. It won't take long to tell."

Arrangements were simple. For a small weekly sum, Webb would act as porter for whatever guests used the house for overnight stops.

As he went home through the long, soft twilight, Webb's faint smile came out of thoughts of the quaint old women who belonged in Godey's "Lady Book." And Sophie, their maid, whom he had glimpsed briefly. Sophie was quaint, too, and a little disturbing, because of her skin.

"It has a waxy quality," he told Kay that night.

"Cold cream, probably," Kay suggested as she went over his living room with a dust mop. "Me and Sophie," she said. "Only she gets paid for this sort of thing. Mine is a labor of love."

"She looks like what the cartoons used to label as a slavey," Webb continued. He lit a cigarette and settled back on the sofa. "She'd look unnatural without a mop and a bucket. She's got funny eyes."

Kay pushed a lock of black hair out of her eyes. "For a quick glancer, you pick up a lot of detail."

"You notice things when you're keyed up with trouble."

"Trouble? What trouble have you got now?"

"You watch. These swell people in our thriving community will stop trading with me. I'll be fired, and be right back where I was, without a job. So then I'll go away, which I should have done today."

Kay took his cigarette, dragged on it, and sat beside him. "Calamity Curtain, we call him. Look, my dismal dope, if you forget this thing that happened, other people will. Maybe it's none of my business if you choose to mess up your life, but I feel a certain interest. Snap out of it."

"Oh, I'll play up," he said negligently, "but it won't do any good. I got a hunch things are going to happen to me."

"Destiny's darling!" she said scathingly. "So you're going to be singled out for things to happen to!"

"It isn't that cosmic, maybe, but you didn't see the attitude that I bucked all day. You didn't see the eyes shift away, the heads shake after I left."

"But this job, Webb. It's the best thing could have happened. You'll be in the public eye. People will begin taking you for granted if you're just yourself, and before long the whole thing will be forgotten."

He contemplated this thought. "Maybe you're right. I guess my life took a turn for the better today. Maybe I'm headed up, maybe I'm getting a start. Maybe it'll be simple from now on. Yeah. Maybe."

II.

A nice guy, this Court Masters, Webb thought as he rang up the sale of ten gallons of gas. The only one in two weeks who has been decently friendly. More people like him would make this job bearable, now that the natives have stopped trading here.

He took fifteen cents in change from the cash register, picked up a chamois and a small bottle of windshield cleaner, and turned toward Masters' blue sedan at the pumps. At that moment, a com-

pany tank truck chugged into the lot with an early-morning delivery. Also at that moment, the motor of Masters' car roared to life, rose to a high scream—and held it.

Accelerator stuck, Webb thought as Masters peered at the floor boards and leaned forward.

Webb nodded to the truck driver, who had stopped some fifteen feet in front of Masters, and started to cross the driveway between the two machines. The office telephone rang, and he checked his stride, an automatic reaction.

As the phone bell jangled through the motor's high scream, as Webb stopped a foot in midair, the big sedan leaped forward and flung itself into the tank truck. Webb's heart lurched as he thought how one more step would have put him between the sedan and truck, and how he would now be crushed like the chrome bumper, headlights, and radiator grille.

He ran to the car, switched off the motor, and began to drag Masters out of windshield fragments. The operator of the tank truck, a big young man who climbed out of his cab in a kind of leisurely fury, strolled back and lent a gentle, if contemptuous, hand.

The telephone continued to ring.

"This guy is dead," the truck driver observed when they had laid the rumpled Masters in the sunlit driveway.

Webb glanced at the bleeding face and head, laid his ear against the silk shirt. "No. He's just out."

"That's good. He can pay for my fender, then. You better call an ambulance, though. That face is gonna do a lot of bleedin'."

"O. K. See if you can get that sliver out of his chin."

Webb ran into the station, jerked the receiver off the ringing phone. "Hello?"

"Webb, this is Miss Emily. Has Mr. Masters gone?"

"No, he's still here."

"Will you tell him he left his brief case?"

"All right."

"And will you come over? Margaret has a little present for you."

"Thanks. I'm busy right now. Later."

He called the city ambulance, and rejoined the truck driver. Masters was still unconscious, bleeding about the face and throat, and one of his hands appeared broken.

Webb knelt and pressed his handkerchief against the gash on Masters' jaw, and the truck driver sauntered to the front of the car, inspecting the wreckage.

"What happened?" asked a strange voice.

Webb raised his eyes to Louie, known as an odd-jobs man who was seen occasionally around town, and saw that Louie was the first to arrive. Cars had stopped on the highway, and the occupants of a few were coming in to investigate.

"Hello, Louie. Accident, is all. Nobody killed."

Louie tucked his grass sickle under his stringy arm and looked vacantly down at Court Masters.

"Mighty bad bump over that eye," he said. "Mighty bad. What was it you wanted me to do, young feller?"

Webb blinked up at the earnest, empty face. "I don't want you to do anything."

"I got a call to come here for a job," Louie said. "What is it?"

"Job? You're mixed up, Louie. There's not a blade of grass on the lot. You can see that. Somebody else called you."

"This was the place," Louie insisted. "Ain't mixed up on that. Guess I know where I was supposed to go."

"Nobody here called you, Louie. Maybe one of the Parker sisters sent for you. Across the street, there."

Louie squinted at the big gabled house, with its prim face, its genteel admission of hard times—a card in the bay window: "TOURISTS ACCEPTED"—and eyed the sleek lawn.

"Parker sisters? Three old maids?"

"That's right."

Louie slouched off toward the tourist home, muttering. He pushed through a sprinkle of onlookers, crossed the highway warily, and entered the ornamental iron gate.

Webb turned his attention to Court Masters again. The bleeding had almost stopped.

After the ambulance had taken Masters away, and the wrecked sedan had been dollied to the back of the lot, Webb skipped across the street to the Parker residence. He kept an eye on the station for drop-in customers as he waited for an answer to his knock.

The sister who met him was blind, so Webb said, "You wanted me, Miss Emily?"

"I'm Margaret, Webb!" she said tartly. "My land, can't you keep us straight?"

"But you're the one who can see!"

"I am the one who can hear."

"Well, maybe I forgot. You wanted me? I can't stay. I'm on duty."

"Wait here, Webb."

She went smoothly down the hallway and disappeared into the parlor. Through the door which she left open came voices raised in argument. Webb had no conscious desire to eavesdrop, but could not avoid hearing the sharp words of Miss Emily—or Miss Gertrude.

"When we send for you, Louie, you know it's us. Gracious, a body'd think you were abused!"

"Well, somebody sent for me," Louie grumbled, "and—"

"Turn your face this way!" snapped the sister. "You know I have to read your lips."

"I was sayin'," Louie continued loudly, "that somebody told me to go across the street. I'm busy, Miss Emily, I can't go chasin' wild geese. I got lotsa jobs, I have, these days. Go to this place, go to that place, that's all I hear."

"Well, get about your business, then! When we want you, you'll know. Gracious, Louie! Sometimes I think you're downright stupid."

Louie came down the hall, muttering under his breath. He nodded to Webb, clumped down the steps and shuffled away. Webb felt a twinge of sympathy for the old gardener who got his jobs mixed, and wondered where he had known the Parker sisters. They seemed to be on friendly, insulting terms.

Miss Margaret returned with a brief case and a tiny package. "Louie said there was an accident."

"That Mr. Masters," Webb explained. "His foot feed stuck, and he got his car in gear somehow. If you hadn't phoned, I'd 've stepped in front of his car and maybe got killed."

"Will you give him this brief case?"

"Well, he's in the hospital."

"Gracious! Was he hurt bad?"

"Cut up some. He'll live, I guess. I'll keep it for him."

The sister who could see had come into the hall and stood beside Miss Margaret, her good eye twinkling at Webb. He was uncertain as to which she was, and said nothing.

"You need a haircut, Webb."

"Yes'm." He shifted his glance to a low, slim roadster gliding into the station. "I got to go."

"You may open this later." Miss Margaret gave him the package, which he put in his pocket, and the brief case, and Webb hurried to attend to his customer.

Buttermilk eyes. That was Webb's most lasting impression of this neat, middle-aged man who wore his hat at a jaunty tilt on silver-gray hair. He remembered the precise, businesslike attitude, yes. But the eyes were startling, so light they seemed almost without color. They watched Webb without expression as he crossed the highway, and the thin mouth remained a humorless line as Webb spoke pleasantly and inquired the man's needs.

"You are Webb Curtain." It was not a question.

"Why—yes."

"I have a job for you. A better job than this."

"Who are you?"

"At the moment, I am confidential secretary to Mr. Lorimer Grach. I am Mr. Potter. There is a place in Mr. Grach's organization for you."

"I never heard of him."

Mr. Potter almost smiled. "Ah, but the reverse is not true. You are known to him."

Webb set one foot on the running board. "I'd like a better job, all right. What is it?"

"Your duties will be to conduct investigations."

"Of what?"

"You will be told at the proper time."

"This sounds funny to me. What is Grach's organization, and how did he hear of me?"

"He is head of a national investigation agency. He heard of you through my own research."

Webb drew his light brows together. "When and where would I work?"

"As soon as you can get away from this job, you will come to New York for instructions. Here is my card. Wire me collect when you are ready, and a plane ticket will be sent you."

Webb's emotion was one of puzzled elation. He sat in the station chair, neglecting his sweeping, neglecting his bookkeeping, and watched traffic without seeing it. His thoughts were not interrupted by customers; this station was unfortunately situated for through traffic, and local residents had transferred their business elsewhere on the day he went to work.

To shake the dust of this town from his heels, this town where people looked away as he passed, that was a noble thought. But to have a good job at the end of his exit, that was colossal.

His eye fell on the brief case of Court Masters, which he had laid on his desk. This reminded him of Miss Margaret's present, and he unwrapped it.

It was a ring. The setting was a band of exquisitely chased silver, and the stone was a polished half mound. Topaz or amethyst, he thought. Deep in the center of the stone was a phenomenon. A tiny pair of scissors.

Webb smiled with delight at the curious beauty of the ensemble. The scissors appeared to be formed by natural fractures in the stone. That was the only explanation he could accept. Nobody, he thought, genius or magician, could bury a microscopic gold instrument inside solid rock without splitting the rock. And this stone had not been split.

He put it on his finger and went through the motions of running a filling station until closing time. Then he went across the street both to thank Miss Margaret for the ring and to tell the sisters of his plans.

"Whoever takes my place will handle your guests' baggage and cars, I imagine," he said.

Miss Margaret and the sister who was both blind and deaf were in the parlor. The third, who could see, was not in evidence.

"Excuse me, Webb," Miss Margaret said, "while I find Emily."

She went out of the room, and Webb watched the blind and deaf sister weaving a tapestry. He

was fascinated by the lightning, sure play of her fingers, and moved closer to the dim corner where she worked. There he was caught by the design and the feeling in the scene depicted.

"That's life," he said. "It's real."

Miss Gertrude's white head never moved, and her creamy hands extending from lace cuffs continued their rhythmic motion as she finished the last few inches of the border. Webb examined the scene in detail, peering over her shoulder.

In one corner was a red-headed man, spraddled on solid feet, one arm thrust toward the observer. In it was a train, modern and streamlined. There was a moon, a gun, a broom, and a kitchen sink. There was a blonde.

He stared down for some time at the blonde. She was tall and glamorous, with long legs and violet eyes. She had shoulders smooth and rich as old ivory. Her wise mouth slanted under a thin nose. She was beautiful.

In addition to these characters were a dark man with a hawk face and brilliant teeth, a woman with a naked knife in her hand, a white-bearded bindle stiff, a blue lamb, and a white-handled hairbrush.

Even the hairbrush did not strike a discordant note, did not spoil the living symmetry of the scene and its background of well-muscled hills. Such an unrelated list of things and people should create an air of surrealism, Webb thought. But they belonged. They made a complete and natural whole.

He straightened as Miss Margaret and Miss

Emily came in from the hallway, and returned Miss Emily's smile.

"You're thinking of going away?" she asked.

Webb went into detail on the treatment he had received from the townspeople since the death of his mother and father, his increasing mental misery, his determination to go to some place where he was not known, and the providential, timely offer.

"I'd like to stay," he said. "I grew up here. But I can't take it, I guess. I hear the whispers around town. I can't sleep, thinking about them."

The first comment on his remarks came from Miss Gertrude, and planted a thin chill at the top of Webb's spine.

"Grach will die," she said quietly.

Webb jerked his head at her. She was still at work. He looked at Miss Emily. "I thought you said she couldn't hear."

"She can't. Did she say something?"

"She said this man I'm to work for will die."

Miss Emily nodded her head. "Then he will."

"But how did she know his name?" Webb cried. "I didn't mention it."

Miss Margaret turned her sightless eyes in Webb's direction. "You may take Gertrude's word."

"But it's—" He paused, shrugged. "I better go. Thanks for everything."

He hurried away, and did not notice until he reached home that he was carrying Court Masters' brief case, which he had intended to drop off at the hospital.

III.

His telephone rang as he was washing his dinner dishes. He wiped his hands on the dish towel and went into the living room.

"Is this Webb Curtain?" a male voice asked.

"Yes."

"Get out of town, Webb."

Webb frowned at the phone for a long second. "Who is this?"

"Never mind. Just a friend. We're giving you three days to clean up your business and scram."

"Listen, whoever you are. What's up?"

"We don't want you here, Webb. When you chased those kids with a rock in your hand a couple weeks ago, we figured it might be caused by shock. But when you tried to kill that guy in your station today, we decided you're dangerous."

"What the hell are you talking about? What kids?"

"Those kids you chased. We know about it. You were seen and recognized. Then this stranger today. He hadn't done anything to you."

Webb remembered the little boys and girls, and their "Hello, crazy man," and pictured the tales they must have told.

"Who are you?" he snarled into the phone. "If I find out, so help me God, I'll—"

"Getting violent won't help you," the voice said. "We'll bring out a strait jacket and cool you down. We don't want to toss you in the loony bin, because you might be all right somewhere else. Beat it. That's all we want."

"You go to hell!" Webb flared, and hung up.

As he finished the dishes, reaction set in. He regarded the town with a bleak and bitter mind. He had known these people all of his life. He had regarded them as friends, who would stand by in case of trouble.

"Thank God," he said aloud. "Thank God I *can* get away."

He enumerated the remaining tasks, before he could wire Mr. Potter for a plane ticket. Pack his belongings, clean out this rented house, ship his baggage by train, say good-by to Larry and Kay.

Kay. He had forgotten that she was a problem. She wouldn't like it.

He snapped off the lights, walked across the street to her house, and they drove in her car to a quiet little hill at the edge of town. She selected a spot as far as possible from the parked cars of other young couples, and listened quietly as he brought events up to date.

"I'm started up," he said, when their cigarettes were twin blobs of red. "I'm on my way. What do you think of it?"

"If you ever have any children, it'll be pretty hard to explain what a brave man their father was."

"That's unfair. The proposition is just that I've got a better job."

"You've got an unfinished job here."

"These people think I'm nuts, Kay. Am I expected to stand by and take it?"

"Will you ever be happy until you show them you're not?"

"Listen, you haven't had them walk across the street to keep from speaking to you. You haven't had kids giggle as you passed. You haven't had them look a hole through you. You haven't had anonymous phone calls."

She crushed her cigarette in the dashboard ash tray, leaned back quietly, folded her hands and eyed the eastern glow where a misshapen moon was rising.

"What good would it do," he went on in a petulant tone, "if I prove to a bunch of dopes that I'm as sane as they, which isn't saying much? What do I care about their opinion? The only important opinion is my own."

She switched on the ignition, started the motor, and headed back.

"Now what's the matter?" he demanded.

"Let's not talk about it, Webb."

"But why? You're acting like a child."

"It's the company I keep."

"Listen to me," he said grimly. "You think I'm running away. Well, I'm just accepting a better position. That's all. That's all, see?"

"Let it go, Webb, let it go."

"You can't do this to me, Kay. You're being narrow-minded. Don't you care anything about my future?"

"All right. I'm being narrow-minded. But let's not argue about it. I want to go to bed. Good night."

She stopped before his house, motor still running, preparatory to turning into her own driveway.

He stepped out, slammed the door, and stamped inside. He flung everything movable into his various luggage, telephoned a telegram to Mr. Potter, and fell sullenly into bed.

He was ready to go. His baggage had been shipped, all except one piece which he would take with him on the afternoon plane from the county seat, twenty miles distant. He sat in the filling-station office, waiting for the truck driver to relieve him, to take over until a new man could be hired.

The telephone rang. Kay.

"Look, Webb," she said. "I was a trifle abrupt last night, but I was in a hurry to get alone. I don't want you to go, Webb. It won't be good for you, and— Well, I just don't want you to go."

"I'll be back, Kay. I'll write to you."

"Don't bother, then!"

The phone was dead. He frowned at it. Webb Curtain was unhappy. He cradled the receiver, and stared at traffic on the highway. Inside him was the feeling that he should remain, defy the town and its shifty eyes, its behind-the-hand whispers. Inside him was the surge to battle.

But in addition was this fear, this cringing away from contemptuous pity. What is a man, he asked himself, except the sum total of public opinion? Here he was regarded as hereditarily tainted with the insanity which drove his mother and father to take their own lives. Regardless of what he felt, *knew* about himself, he was actually insane in this town.

Actually? Note quite. Not as long as Kay, Larry, and the Parker sisters believed in his sanity. But they were human, subject to pressure from mass opinion. If they fell into the same trap as the others, by supplying a fictitious effect for a known cause, then whatever he felt about himself as an individual was not valid as long as it differed from the opinions of others. If everyone else believed him black, or green, or spotted, any conviction of himself to the contrary was simply further evidence of insanity.

He felt that his future happiness depended upon his decision to go away, where he was not known, and work out his own destiny. True, a nucleus was here, a nucleus around which he might build to recognition of his sanity. But it was not enough, Kay, Larry, and the Parker sisters.

When the truck driver came and took over the station, Webb carried his bag across to the prim tourist home. The sister who met him at the door was blind, so he said:

"It's Webb, Miss Margaret. I've come to say good-by."

"I'm Emily, Webb. Come in. Margaret is here, but Gertrude has gone to New York. Don't bother to speak to Margaret. She can't hear or see you. I'll tell Gertrude good-by for you."

Webb's confusion as he sat in the parlor was overridden by his personal problems, consideration of Kay, and worry over his possible cowardice; he did not, therefore, give more than a passing thought to the sisters who appeared to switch names almost daily. His interpretation at that moment was that they achieved a harmless enjoyment from mystifying their few friends—namely, himself and Louie. Lonely old women who lived mainly in one small room and had contact with stray paying guests were restricted as to pleasure, and if they had fun with their harmless pastime, who could blame them?

Miss Emily touched his hair. "You didn't get the haircut?"

"I forgot. I'm a little upset. I'll have time if I hurry. Larry will pick me up in forty minutes. I guess I should get it cut, if I'm going to be met at the airport by my boss."

"Yes, Webb. You must get your hair cut."

"Well," he said, edging toward the door, "I want to thank you. You've been nice to me. And I wish you luck."

"Thank you, Webb. I'm sure we'll make a go of this."

"By the way," he suggested, "if things get too tough, why don't you offer some of those tapestries for sale? They're wonderful. This one by the fireplace, with the blonde. I know it was made yesterday, but it looks . . . uh, timeless. Like these others. That big one over the mantel. It's like an epoch out of history."

"We don't make them to sell, Webb, but for pleasure."

"Well, then, how about those in the hall? They're different, hard and modern. Would you sell them?"

"Those!" Miss Emily sniffed. "Those are machine-made. I wouldn't even give them away. I don't hold with new-fangled trash! Run along, boy, and see the barber."

"Well, then, I'll see you again."

As on the preceding day, an unexpected comment came from the blind and deaf sister in the corner. She raised her head from a pattern of twigs she was arranging on a little table and said:

"Sooner than you think."

Webb felt again the thin chill on the back of his neck, felt again the urge to hurry away.

"You said she couldn't hear, Miss Emily."

"Nor can she."

"But . . . but— Well, good-by."

He walked down Main Street to the Elite Barber Shop, operated by a voluble man named Thomkins, whose indefatigable voice was stilled when Webb Curtain entered and sat in the chair, whose keen suspicious eyes glittered in the mirror at Webb, whose thin lips compressed in a line.

"Just cut it," Webb said.

Mr. Thomkins went to work with comb and shears, and as he worked, his eyes lost their glitter, his mouth relaxed. After opening his mouth several times as if to make a comment, he presently laid his tools on the glass shelf under the mirror and curled a little smile at Webb.

"Hear you're goin' away."

"Yep."

"Goin' far?"

"Yep."

"Indianapolis, maybe?"

"Maybe."

"Lotsa people will ask about yuh. What'll I tell 'em?"

"Tell 'em to go to the devil."

"Sho', no call to get het up. Nobody bears you a malice."

"Can't you work and talk at the same time? I'm in a hurry."

"Oh, sure."

Mr. Thomkins picked up his tools and went silently back to the task, pursing his lips at intervals. After a few moments of this, he laid his instruments aside again.

"You got a job some'rs else?"

"Yep."

"Good job, maybe?"

"Listen!" Webb grated. "I'm going to New York, because I don't like the way people here tie their shoes. I've got a swell job waiting for me, training seals. Baby seals. I'm going to train them to shed their coats yearly, so we can make all sorts of fur coats without harming the source. You can see how that would shoot fur prices to hell. So I'm going to sell the process for a million dollars, to keep it off the market. Then I'm going to the South Seas and throw native girls at coconuts. That ought to be enough information for you to spread around. And in case you've forgotten, I—want—a—haircut!"

"Oh, sure."

Mr. Thomkins continued, with a reflective gleam in his little eyes. When he had finished, he brushed Webb's hair with a white-handled brush, took fifty cents, and Webb departed at a run for the corner where he found Larry eying his watch.

"Gosh, Webb, this is cuttin' it close. The plane takes off in twenty-five minutes, and it's twenty miles."

"Barber held me up," Webb said, leaping into the roadster. "Don't spare the horsepower!"

Once again Webb gave himself over to admiration of Larry's mastery of this rakish mass of rubber and steel. His wide blue eyes steady ahead, Larry whipped in and out of traffic at a mile a minute, careening to the point at which threatening screams came from one set of tires or the other, but never too far. Irate shouts of other motorists were whipped away by the wind of their passage and by the spreading gap between the roadster and its speed-conquered victims.

Out of the city limits, on a curling road between solid little hills, the speedometer needle clung to eighty. As the smooth ribbon of concrete raced toward them, Webb became aware of a new sound, growing less faint by the second, finally turning into the definite scream of a motorcycle siren.

Larry slowed, came gradually to a stop, and the State traffic cop parked his cycle on the gravel shoulder, a few feet ahead. He was deliberate in his actions. He shut off the motor. He sat quite still for a second. He pulled off one gauntlet, glanced at his fingernails. He pulled off the other. He laid them precisely on one handle bar. He hitched at his gun belt. He got off and faced the roadster. He took a pad of citations from his flannel shirt, a pencil from his shining left boot, wet the pencil briefly with his tongue, and pushed his khaki cap off his swarthy forehead. He copied Larry's license number, one slow figure at a time. He came around to Larry's side, set one foot on the running board, and wreathed his dark hawk face in a gentle smile which bared the whitest teeth Webb had ever seen.

"Going somewhere, boys?" he murmured.

"Give me the ticket, copper!" Larry snapped. "I don't have to listen to your sarcasm."

The officer gave Larry a long glance of gentle pity. "So young, too, to go to jail. What will your mother say, lad?"

"Give—me—the—ticket!"

"O. K., bud. Give me your driver's license!"

The harsh formalities were speedily disposed of, and the cop was on his way once more. Larry looked at his wrist watch, and shook his head.

"Never make it, Webb. What do you want to do?"

"Let's go back, damn it. I can stay at the Parkers tonight. We'll get an earlier start tomorrow. Why do these things happen to me, I wonder?"

Larry made a U turn, and loafed along the back trail. "You can get away all right tomorrow, Webb."

Black satin, white lace, and one good eye.

"I thought you were in New York, Miss Gertrude," Webb said.

"So I was, Webb. Heavens! Can't I come back? Well, don't stand there like a ninny. Come in. You can have the spare room." She called inside: "Sophie! Come here."

For the second time, Webb wondered about Sophie and her exact status in the household. She cleaned. That was obvious, for she always carried a mop and a bucket. She cleaned everything but herself, for her waxlike skin was smudged, as it had been the first time he saw her. She straightened. She kept the house neat, in contrast to her drooping stocking, her twisted apron. She brushed and dusted, everything but her stringy hair.

She now shuffled down the hall, took Webb's bag and led him upstairs to the room with its big double bed, its pink wallpaper, its faint odor of violets. She gave him a fixed but vague stare with her saffron eyes, and slumped out of the room.

Webb sat on the edge of the bed and silently cursed the delays which had caused him to miss the plane. The curious barber, the traffic cop.

A telegram. He must wire Mr. Potter. Unavoidable delay. Arrive tomorrow.

He combed his newly-cut hair before the dresser mirror and wrinkled his nose at the artificial smell of tonic. Kay wouldn't like— He caught the thought, snapped it off. Kay wouldn't know.

He walked to the telegraph office on Main Street. The town was sleepy with sunset. Storekeepers stared vacantly at the torpid street, awaiting the inner drive which would send them home to supper. The janitor lowered the flag which drooped above the brick post office. The ancient telegraph messenger drowsed over a Western magazine; the operator's eyes were closed under a green eyeshade.

Webb sent his wire and stepped out into the fading rose twilight. What of the evening?

Back to his room? To the pool hall, to watch the Kelly game? Not that, for the eyes of even steady loafers would shift away. To the Greek's, for a thick steak and onions and cream gravy? No onions. Not that he would see Kay, but still—

He was halfway through the steak when Pat Cain came in from the offices of the *Sentinel*, and sat at Webb's table. The sprinkle of customers raised interested eyes, and Mike, the counterman, lifted ropelike eyebrows.

"I've been looking for you," Cain said in his bull voice.

Webb blinked. He continued to blink after the action no longer had anything to do with surprise. "Th-thanks, Pat. Why?"

Cain picked up a menu in his powerful hands, skimmed it with cold eyes. "Same slum, I see." To the waitress, he purred: "Your special, dear. And dust off the carrots tonight." To Webb, once more full-voiced: "Do you want a job?"

Quietly, hands tense under the table, Webb asked: "Why are you doing this, Pat?"

Cain lowered his voice. "I'm damned sick of the treatment you're getting around here. Tar and feathers, eh? Well, let 'em try it!"

"What are you talking about?"

"A movement began last night, to run you out of town. Seems young Tom Eagan had his eye on that filling-station job you've got. Well, let him have it. You work for me."

"But didn't you know?" Webb sketched the offer of Mr. Potter, and told how he was at the moment supposed to be flying to New York to join the forces of Lorimer Grach.

Cain eyed him steadily. "So you were running out?"

"No, Pat. It's just that—" He halted, fumbling. "I can't tell you here. It's too public."

"Finish your meal. We'll talk in the office."

Webb faltered in his tale of eyes, sneers, and threats, in the editorial office which fronted for the long, low combination composing-pressroom were the click of teletypes and eccentric rumble of the small rotary made orderly bedlam. He faltered because his eye fell on a yellow slip of wire copy, dated New York. He pulled it off the spike at Cain's elbow.

NEW YORK, May 26, 1941 (AP)—Lorimer Grach, head of a national investigating agency, died of a heart attack at LaGuardia Field today, while—

The teletyped letters blurred. Grach had gone to meet the plane in which Webb was scheduled to arrive.

"I'll take the job, Pat. And thanks a hell of a lot."

"Hop over to the hospital, then. Fellow named Masters is yelling about a story of international importance."

"Oh, God!"

"What?"

"I just thought of a piece of baggage I shipped to New York."

IV.

Webb curled his hands around the tubular frame of Court Masters' bed. "I told you," he said tensely, "I just threw everything into my baggage that wasn't nailed down. I'm sorry, and I'll have your brief case back as soon as possible."

"The small-town hick," Masters sneered, "certainly hits a high point in stupidity."

Webb glared at the steady, burning eyes in their frame of bandages, the full, twisted mouth. "If I hadn't acted quickly, you'd be dead now. And your brief case wouldn't be very important."

"Wouldn't it?"

The tone was redolent with inference, and Webb's fingers tightened on the bedstead.

"My editor says you've been saying things about a story of international importance."

"Your editor is like everybody else in this town. Crazy. Except possibly you. You seem to be sane, but unintelligent."

"Thank you," Webb said, and meant it.

"I've been a little tougher than circumstances seem to warrant," Masters said. "Especially since I left the case behind me in the house of those strange old maids. But I've got to have that brief case, and what's in it, by Friday. This is Wednesday. If it isn't here by then, things are going to get unpleasant for you."

Webb laughed shortly, explosively. "Unpleasant!"

"You've got troubles?"

Webb considered the tactical advantage of telling Masters about the situation to undermine his secrecy concerning the contents of his brief case.

"Troubles," he echoed. "Yes. I've got 'em. You see, my mother and dad committed suicide about two weeks ago."

Masters shook his head in honest sympathy.

"They were temporarily insane," Webb continued. "That's a cinch. Well, the rumor started that I was, too. In a way, it seemed providential, because it took my mind off the tragedy. But it didn't blow over. It snowballed, and now the whole town thinks I'm nuts."

"And what do you think?"

"I'm all right!" Webb flared. "I'm no different than I was two weeks ago, before—it happened."

Masters' unbroken hand toyed with the sheet, the lines around his eyes relaxed. "I made a nasty wisecrack a few minutes ago. I don't suppose I meant it, even then—about your unintelligence, I mean. But I probably did mean the crack about your sanity. You seem as well balanced as anyone I've seen here. The nurses, the doctor, they don't appear any different from you. Yet, there must be something. Maybe you have done one thing which started all the rumors. Do you know what it was?"

Webb cast back into his memory, probing, analyzing. "No. Whatever I did seemed natural to me. Yet, as you say, there must be something. Where there's smoke, there's fire."

"That's always true," Masters agreed. "Well,

why don't you figure out what it was, and adjust it. Or leave town."

"If I go away, I'm running from it. I don't like to do that."

"What you need to do then, is something startling, something that will focus attention on you, something that will establish your sanity beyond any doubt."

"What, for instance? I can't think of anything."

Masters was quiet, his heavy brows drawn with thought. After a long silence, he said, "You saved my life, maybe. I'm grateful for that, and I'd like to help you. When my brief case gets back, I'll show you what's in it. We'll be partners on its development. We can make history."

"What is it?" Webb asked as casually as possible. His tone was not very casual, however. He sensed a tremendous sincerity in Masters. He felt that he stood on the brink of important events.

Masters shot a quick, narrowed glance. "I can't tell you, yet. Furthermore, this is off the record. If you give me your word not to reveal anything without my permission, I'll show you. Otherwise, the deal is off."

Webb smiled wryly. His strategy had worked. His admission of difficulties had broken down Masters' secrecy to an even greater extent that he had hoped. But an agreement such as Masters proposed would tie his hands.

"I don't like it, Mr. Masters. I was sent over here to get the story for my paper. I'd like to have it, if it's as important as your attitude implies. But at the same time, if it can help my present situation, you have my word. It's a deal."

They shook hands on it. "They tell me," Masters said, "that I'll be out of here tomorrow. I'll meet the train with you, and you'll see something. Really something."

"I'll wire for my baggage."

On his way back to the *Sentinel* office, Webb passed Sherry's drugstore and the group of young men who met early each evening on the front sidewalk to plan for the night. They watched him approach, natty and alert in fresh clothes, hats far back on their heads, a cigarette dripping from each mouth.

Tom Eagan was there, Tom Eagan who had played tackle to Webb's quarterbacking, who had painted neighboring towns with Webb, who had hunted birds' eggs with Webb as a child. His eyes also twinkled with amused contempt as Webb hurried along the walk.

Webb flicked a glance, did not speak. He was almost past when a remark from Eagan struck a match to his fury.

"Whipped any kids lately, Curtain?"

The group found this funny, and their laughter continued for a few seconds while Webb faced them with blazing eyes.

"Don't talk like that to the Fur Coat King, Tom," said one of the group. "He's a millionaire."

Laughter bubbled again. Webb clenched his hands, gave each a slow direct look, and turned away. Behind him, Tom Eagan called an ultimatum.

"Get out of town, Webb. We don't want any loonies that go around scaring little girls. You've got two days."

Webb's hands shook as he continued past dark store windows. Part of it was from anger and a sense of injustice, but part of it was pure despair.

Why? That was the unanswerable.

"I am sane," he said aloud. "I *am* sane!"

He had a deep-seated belief in cosmic justice. His creed was based on the accepted, solid foundation of human behavior: live right, and, fare well. He was, therefore, baffled by and resentful of the vague and uncomfortable hate which he felt all about him. Not one of his actions since the death of his father and mother had deviated appreciably from his normal behavior pattern, yet each action had been twisted into evidence of insanity. Chasing children. Threatening to kill a stranger. Even his evasion of personal questions by Mr. Thomkins.

Two weeks ago, he reflected, the fantasy he told the curious barber would have been accepted by his friends for what it was, a subtle insult. It would have been a good gag, one to tell over a bottle of beer. Now, while it was probably related over beer, it was no gag.

"They think I wasn't kidding," he told Pat Cain, after reporting failure to get a printable story from Court Masters.

Cain put down a set of proofs he was checking for headline errors. "Go on home, Webb. Your regular duties won't start until tomorrow. It won't seem as important tomorrow, either. Nothing ever does. Show up here around noon. I'll have a couple of assignments for you."

Outside, Webb considered channels of action as he walked the dark street to the Parker residence. Even though the contents of Masters' brief case might offer a solution to his problem, it was yet two days before he could see whatever it might be. Furthermore, he was sworn to a secrecy controlled by Masters, and anything might happen to that. If he was to do anything constructive toward removing the town's suspicion, he should begin.

He needed advice. Whose? Kay's? He knew her answer: stay and show 'em. But he felt that stubbornness alone was not enough. Miss Emily-Margaret-Gertrude's? They were not the type to

invite intimacies, but that might be all the better. They could be objective.

The sister who met him at the door said crisply: "You have a visitor. Kay Loring."

Kay showed no expression that Webb could read when he entered the parlor where she sat between the other two sisters on the horsehair sofa. Her eyes were wide and dark; that was all. Her full mouth was quiet, did not lift at the corners. Her slim hands were loosely folded in her lap.

"Well," Webb said, "as you see, it didn't work: I'm back."

"Give me a cigarette," Kay said. When it was lit, "Larry said you were here. I came over to see if I could stop you from leaving tomorrow."

"I've been stopped." He told her about his job.

"Then you will live here," Miss Emily-Margaret-Gertrude—Webb didn't know which—decided. "Sophie!"

Sophie came to the door, fixed vacuous eyes on the sister who could see. "Miss Margaret?"

Miss Margaret made a gesture, little more than the twitch of a long, white finger, and Sophie went away.

"Did you give her an order?" Webb asked.

"I told her to bring tea, and to fix up your room."

"How?"

"Sophie has been with us a long time. She understands us."

"Webb," Kay broke in, "I'm glad about the job."

Webb brought his attention back to her in somewhat dazed fashion, and saw the sister on her right form a tender little smile. The sister on Kay's left was she, apparently, who was blind and deaf.

"We are all glad, Kay," said she who was smiling.

"Thanks, Miss Emily," Kay said, "though how you knew it would happen, I don't know." To Webb: "She told me that I would hear good news when you came home."

"Temporarily, anyway," Webb said grimly. "Some of the boys say they're going to run me out of town. I think it's just idle talk, but I ought to do something about it."

Sophie brought tea things, arranged them on a low table, gave Webb another of her curiously empty stares, and left. He felt again that sensation of something which deviated from the norm, was uncomfortably unable to put a name to it.

Miss Margaret distributed tea and little cakes, then gave Webb a long glance with her good eye. "What do you want to do, Webb?"

"I want to be comfortable," he said. "When I walk along the street, I don't want to feel their eyes between my shoulder blades, I don't want to see their heads wag."

"What's all this about running you out of town?" Kay asked.

Webb told them enough of what he had heard and experienced. "I don't expect any direct action," he said, "but at the same time it's damned annoying."

Into the silence, Miss Gertrude, who was blind and deaf, dropped a remark: "You don't believe in yourself."

"I do!" Webb flared. "I—"

"Don't argue with her," Miss Emily interrupted. "She can't hear you."

The effect on Kay was apparently similar to what Webb had felt on two former occasions. She edged away, closer to Miss Emily. She glanced at Miss Gertrude, questioned Webb with her eyebrows, then looked at the floor.

"I think Gertrude put her finger on the trouble," Miss Margaret said. "My land, what do you care about other people? If you were sure of yourself, you wouldn't worry about them."

"I *am* sure of myself!"

"You can't be. If you were, you'd ignore such things as you say happened tonight. You'd take no notice."

"It's pretty hard not to notice, when you're stopped on the street. And get phone calls."

"I think they've got something there, Webb," Kay said. "Quiet dignity, my boy. Unruffled. That's the way to bring 'em around."

"It doesn't make any difference," he said, "about my attitude. That's not the important thing. You've just accused me of being afraid the town is right. I'm not, I tell you! I'm not. I don't feel a twinge of suspicion about my sanity. Look at the way I conduct myself. I've been going to work, taking care of the job, going home at night. Is that abnormal? I don't let it worry me too much, except for the eyes, the headshaking, the jeers, and the phone calls. But I don't think about them all the time. Sometimes I think of other things. Isn't that natural behavior?"

"Why don't you try ignoring it altogether?" Kay asked.

Webb got to his feet. "All right, all right! I'll do it. Quiet dignity, you want? O. K. Come on, I'll walk home with you."

Miss Gertrude made her final statement for the evening. "There is trouble ahead. There is death."

Her two sisters nodded solemn agreement. Webb felt a slight sneer on his face. One coincidence he could believe. Miss Gertrude had predicted the death of Grach. That had been a specific prophecy. Her "there is death" meant nothing. It was the sort of thing said by bangled, swarthy women in tent shows. Of course there is death. There is always death.

"Let's go," he said to Kay. To Miss Emily, "I'll be right back."

As they walked the empty streets, they were quiet, arm in arm. Webb reflected how pleasant this town was near midnight. The little breeze whispering through maple trees which formed an archway over the street, the quiet dark houses, the fitful gleam of stars through the trees, the far bark of a dog, the distance-strangled cry of a freight train, the peace.

Home. Only a word, home. But, under the right conditions, the word was full of the warm color of living. Under his present circumstances, it was still home, but the color was gone, and the warmth.

"Wonder where they came from?" Kay asked.

"What?" Webb said blankly.

"The Parkers."

"I haven't got around to asking. I can't place their accents. Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious. I guess they're no more eccentric than some others here, but their identical resemblance to each other adds something to their eccentricity. Something—queer."

"It's an act," Webb said. "They probably gave their swains hell when they were young. The poor guys didn't know what they had said to whom, the way they mix up their names every day or so. Probably why they never married. I mean, how could a guy be sure?"

"They told me tonight that something was going to happen to us, Webb."

"What could happen?"

"They didn't tell me. They said maybe it could be sidetracked, but it looked bad. Webb, let's keep things the way they are between us."

"Sure, what can we lose?"

"A lot of things."

"Don't be hysterical. Adopt a quiet dignity, like me."

"Can you maintain it?"

"Stick around and see. Here we are. Good night."

She clung to him for a moment, and he went away puzzled by this new emotional note between them. Kay, whom he had known all his life, was somehow different.

His consideration of the new tone in their relationship was broken by footsteps approaching a lighted intersection. They were feminine steps, hurrying.

Webb and the girl reached the corner at the same time, emerging into the light from behind the high hedge around the big Eagan residence. She was Bessie Hillman, who worked for the Eagans, apparently on her way home from late chores.

She looked at Webb. She stopped, gasped, and seemed to be paralyzed with fear. Her mouth dropped open, her eyes were wide and white, one hand clutched her throat which worked vainly at a scream.

The scream materialized. "Don't touch me, Webb Curtain! Don't touch me! Help!"

She ran, and her screams shrilled against the quiet. Webb heard windows raise, after she was out of sight. A voice called sleepy questions. The screams died away.

Webb found himself clutching the lamp-post to keep from running after the girl and explaining that he wished her no harm. Mixed with this emotion also was the desire to beat her, to vent his smoldering hatred of the town on her. With a great effort, he pried himself loose and walked quietly to the Parkers', speculating on what story the girl would tell of this midnight encounter.

V.

Quiet dignity.

Walking to work, he felt resentment closing around him, like movable walls of a torture chamber. He wanted to put out his hands, to push back the walls. He wanted to strike back at the town, to junk his role of quiet dignity.

As he emerged from the Parker yard, Tom Eagan called across from the filling station where he now occupied the position Webb had resigned.

"Get out of town tonight, Webb. Remember."

Webb shoved his fists in his pockets, forced himself to leave the command unchallenged, resisted the impulse to rush across the street and batter at Tom Eagan's handsome face. He wanted to give this attitude a chance, this quiet dignity.

One apparent fact made it easier to ignore Eagan: if Bessie Hillman had told any sort of story about their meeting last night, it had not yet circulated in all quarters. Perhaps, he thought, she hadn't mentioned it.

As he proceeded, he became aware that trouble was brewing.

A little boy, seven or so, was so busy taking a wheel off his wagon that he did not see or hear Webb's approach along the sidewalk until Webb was within ten feet. The little boy looked up, yelled, and scuttled into his yard, crying at the top of his lungs.

His mother, a Mrs. Laughlin whom Webb knew slightly, came to the door, gathered her incoherent offspring in the folds of her print apron, and glared at Webb.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Scaring children! It's a good thing Junior's father isn't here. He'd give you what-for, even if you are weak-minded!"

Quiet dignity.

On the corner of Third and Main, a tight group of men eyed Webb as he came toward them. These were not habitual loafers. For the most part,

they worked the night shift at the Red Dog Mine. They were big, husky, with the sallow complexions of men who work underground.

One stepped out of the group and faced Webb, a lean man in flannel skirt, khaki pants, cowhide boots. "Listen, you! What's this about you chasing Bessie Hillman last night?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Webb said.

"Sammy," said Flannel Shirt, and a pimpled youth stepped out of the group, "what about it?"

"He's the one," Sammy said. "Sis says he chased her and tore her dress. He's a goop, dad says."

"Well?" Flannel Shirt asked.

"It isn't true. Why would I chase her?"

"Never mind why! Did you?"

"No."

"You're a liar."

"What good will it do anybody if I fight you?"

"I called you a liar. Are you gonna take it?"

"Yes."

"You dirty, yellow coward."

Webb hooked a right to Flannel Shirt's jaw. The man fell into the gutter, tried to get up, and fell back with glazed eyes and open mouth. Webb faced the others.

"I didn't want to do that. You heard me try to avoid it. I didn't chase any girl. Now lay off me. I'm not looking for trouble. I just want to be let alone."

He walked leisurely away, but felt their hard, expressionless eyes following.

"Hey, Webb!"

Larry Owen whirled smoothly in to the curb, his face amiably round, his round eyes pleasantly blue. "When do we start, Webb?"

Webb got in beside him. "I'm not going. I'm working at the *Sentinel*. I'm headed there now."

Larry pulled out into the street, shifted into high. "Not going? You got to, Webb."

"Why?"

"Haven't you heard? About the citizens' committee?"

"Now what?"

"They're over at Hillmans'. They got a doctor and everything. They're pretty mad. What did you do it for, Webb? Just trying to scare her?"

"I didn't do anything, Larry. She made it up." He told the true story of the incident.

"Well, if you say so," Larry said doubtfully. "But I heard she had bruises all over."

"Let me out. Thanks for the ride."

Quiet dignity.

It was shaken somewhat as he waited for Pat Cain to look up from early wire copy. He felt something like the man who had perfect faith in the proposition that if he ignored the wounded tiger, it would go away presently. The tiger went away, all right, but the man was dead, even though his faith paid off.

He did not like to draw such a violent parallel to his own situation. He did not want to feel that conditions were serious as yet. He wished to ignore, and by ignoring end the faint but growing clamor.

Pat Cain raised his massive head. "Sit down, Webb." Webb did so, and Cain's heavy features settled into an expression of regret touched with brow-drawn confusion. "Webb, I think I jumped the gun in offering you a job."

"What does that mean, Pat?"

"It means you don't work here any more."

"That's a scummy trick."

"It was a scummy trick you played on the Hillman girl. Doc Barnes called up awhile ago, and I sent Jerry out after the story."

"Listen to me, Pat. Here's what happened." Once more he related the incident, with all possible earnestness, and a little sickness, too, down inside.

"Is that on the level, Webb?"

"I hope to die, Pat."

Cain frowned at nothing, slightly above and to the left of Webb. "According to Doc Barnes, she was scratched up. There were bruises here and there, where no bruises ought to be. There'll be a hue and cry, Webb. There'll be trouble. If I could be sure you're telling the truth, I'd string along. But how can I be sure? You haven't a handy witness, have you?"

"No. I was alone."

"I believe you, then. I don't know why. Hunch, I suppose. You'd better scram for a while, though, till the boys cool off. They're working themselves up at the moment. They'll explode almost any time now."

"Where are the cops?"

"Now listen, Webb. A couple of politically appointed constables aren't going to face a crowd of voters, especially when they believe the voters are right. They've been tipped off, no doubt, and have gone fishing."

"I'm not going. The hell with 'em. I swore I wouldn't run out. If I do, it looks like an admission. I didn't touch the Hillman girl, and I'm not fleeing from something I didn't do."

"That's a noble sentiment, lad, but not very damned smart. Think where you are. You're in a small township in an area that grew up on hobnails and six-shooters. There's no formal discipline in these places. We set up codes, and intrust officers with their enforcement, but the instant somebody violates a twisted sense of honor peculiar to these parts, vigilantes ride again and the officers go home."

"Let 'em ride. I don't mind running from them, but if I'm innocent, I'm running from myself."

"You talk like a crazy man, Webb."

"Don't say that to me!"

"Why not? It isn't true. You're not crazy."

Webb made a helpless gesture. "All right, all right. Talk any way you please as long as you believe that. Have you a gun I can borrow?"

"No. And I wouldn't loan it to you if I did. A gun would only make people mad, and maybe get you in the pen, or hung. You're going to *talk* your way out of this, if you get out."

"I'll get out, all right. Things like this just don't happen. There's something screwy, Pat!"

"You're growing up, lad. A realization of the illogic of life is part of the process. But, when you analyze it down, it's pretty much cause and effect. Maybe you don't remember the little things that brought all this about, but they were there, all right. They always are."

"I don't believe it. I didn't do a thing to deserve this hounding I've been getting."

"You must have, Webb, whether you remember or not."

"But I didn't!"

"Sure you did. We're human beings, with a knowledge of right and wrong. We operate by exercise of free will. You did something, all right, that set a chain of events in motion. Everything that happened after that was based on the original action, probably as unimportant as tying your tie crooked."

"All right, I'll grant anything, only let's quit talking. You had a couple of assignments?"

"Not today. I want you away from here. My advice is to hunt a hole."

"I'm staying in the open."

"O. K., but stay somewhere else. It isn't considerate of you to drag your few friends into it, when you're just being stubborn. You know the market on dead heroes these days."

"It's not that serious, Pat. Do you think?"

"Who knows? I've seen lynchings in this country that grew out of a man tipping his hat to the wrong woman. Now beat it. I think this is the calm before the storm."

Webb went out into the noon sun, and eyed the street in both directions. At the far end, a clump of farmers' trucks fringed the feed mill. Desultory pedestrians mottled the sidewalk between. A thin ribbon of traffic moved in sleepy jerks to and from the curve that joined the State highway.

No ferment here. That placid surface hid no seething undercurrents. Webb shrugged away Cain's warnings, and started home. He was hailed from behind, and turned to see Court Masters, one bandage yet across his face, his left arm in a white silk triangle.

"Did you wire for your baggage?"

"Yes. It ought to be here tomorrow."

Masters' eyes twinkled from the bandage. "Good! I had a caller this morning, a Mr. Porter. Somehow, he had heard of what I have in the brief case. He has a client. I think there's a cool million in it."

"Well, I guess that let's me out."

Masters lengthened his stride a little. "Why should it? I told you I'd cut you in. I keep my word."

"But why? I haven't done anything."

"You saved my life, remember. Porter said—By the way, he had the strangest eyes. No color. Looked like—"

"Buttermilk?"

"Good! Exactly. He said—"

"His name is Potter, not Porter."

"So you know him? He is a broker of sorts, and one of his clients is H. William Karp. You know, the man who has more contacts here and abroad than anyone now alive. It seems that Karp will pay any amount for what I have."

"But what *is* it?"

"It's almost impossible to describe, unless you're talking to someone who knows all about it. Potter seemed to know enough, though I don't understand how. I was sure I am the only person alive who ever heard of it. Well, things leak out."

"By the way, where are you staying, Mr. Masters?"

"Wherever you are. I'm not letting you far away from me until after your baggage arrives."

"Well, I suppose there's a vacant room at the Parkers. I'm living there now. But about this million. I don't deserve any part of it. Don't see why you should offer it. I did what anybody else would do, in dragging you out of the car."

"But you did, my boy, and not somebody else. Besides, you're in trouble, and I want to help. You're sane. I know it. I want to help you prove it. Money is the best proof I know, in a place like this."

Webb Curtain knew nothing of the brewing storm forecast by Pat Cain. He was in his room the rest of the day. He did not feel that he was hiding; it was simply that he did not wish to be a fool and stir up the animals by appearing on the street.

For the most part, he lay on the bed and tried to apply Pat Cain's reasoning to his predicament. Some little act, according to Pat, was responsible. Webb could remember many little acts, but they fit no pattern. They were as unrelated as the figures in the tapestry he had admired, which now hung in his room. He made a note to thank Miss Margaret for her thoughtfulness. He had said he liked it; she had put it in his room.

As he looked at it for the second time, he felt a vague and nameless recognition which vanished under closer inspection. He felt that he had seen one or more of the figures recently, and that they had played a part in the development of the present state of affairs. He was unable to identify them, and went back to his analysis.

He knew nothing, then, of the crowd that milled in and out of the Hillman cottage during the afternoon. He knew nothing of the oft-told tale of Bessie's tragedy, and the embroidering thereof.

He never knew of the drinks that were poured, nor the story of how Webb had brutally and maniacally attacked Flannel Shirt with a club—from behind; nor how the fury grew slowly, for it was not fed by Bessie's infirm father or pimpled brother, who were timid by nature.

It remained for outsiders to pick up the flag of Hillman honor, dust it off, and move in a shouting wave to find Webb Curtain.

He heard them some blocks away, marching down the middle of the street. Children fled before the mob, shouting with excitement and dancing to keep from underfoot. Windows along the way were full of citizens' heads.

They were not armed, but they were determined to follow their leader, young Tom Eagan, to whatever destination he should name. "To hell with Webb Curtain" was the tenor of remarks.

They massed before the Parker residence, and made known their mission.

"Curtain! Come out, before we come in!"

"Come out, you lunatic!"

Webb knew fear as he stood inside the hall, one hand on the doorknob. Fear moistened his palms, tugged at the short hairs on his neck, tied knots in his throat, and plugged his lungs. He did not want to step out on the porch.

But he did, for he heard a step behind him. He did not turn, to see if it was one of the Parker sisters, whom he had not seen, or Court Masters. He stepped out on the porch and looked as steadily as possible at Tom Eagan.

"You're supposed to be at work," Webb said.

"I'd lock up anything to get a girl killer, and baby beater," Tom said, and the crowd approved loudly.

"What do you want?" Webb asked, sweating with the effort to keep his voice steady.

"You!" several cried, and a man stepped into the front ranks, a rope coiled over his arm.

"Are you coming out, or do we come after you?" Tom Eagan asked.

"What are you going to do with that rope?"

"We figure it this way," Eagan answered. "If you're in a crazy house, us taxpayers have to feed you. This way we save money, and you won't attack any more girls. Are you coming?"

"You'll have to come after me," Webb said.

The front wave rolled over the fence and lawn toward Webb. As he turned to run into the house, he saw Court Masters step out on the porch, a double-barreled shotgun in the crook of his good arm.

The mob halted. Masters looked at them. He said nothing, but the shouts died, and men shifted from one foot to another. They wiped at their faces with colored bandannas.

Masters lifted his lip. "Fifty to one, eh? Well, that's a fair measure of your courage. That's how brave you are.

"How come the daylight, though? That isn't like your kind. Liquored up? I can smell it. Even so, guys like you usually sneak up behind a man in the dark. This is something new, this daylight.

"What do you want with this boy? He hasn't hurt you."

"He attacked a girl," one of the men said.

"I don't believe it. But even if it's true, no mob is going to take him. I can't shoot many of you, it's true, but which two will be the first to die? I'm going to get at least two of you, right in the front row. So step up, boys. Volunteer.

Get yourself measured for a halo." He paused. "What? Nobody? Then listen. Get the hell out of here. I count three, I shoot." He raised the gun, cocked both barrels.

During his short words, the mob had begun to thin around the edges. Men walked away. When Masters raised the shotgun, the front wave sucked back, and the rear gave way.

All but a woman. Mrs. Hillman.

She stepped forward, a long butcher knife naked in her hand. Her eyes were flames of blue fury, her face twisted, neck corded.

"You'll never jump nobody else's girl!" she snarled, and hurled the knife at Webb.

He dodged, stumbled against Masters, who twisted in an effort to stay on his feet and swung the gun barrels so that they pointed at Webb's face. Webb felt a blow from the side which pushed him off the porch as one of the shells in the gun exploded. He felt the shock of the explosion, heard shot thud into the porch roof, and fell so that he saw the remainder of the action.

The recoil jerked the shotgun out of Masters' hand, and it fell butt foremost on the bottom step in such a position that the cocked hammer snagged on the step above and fired the remaining shell at the instant Masters' shoulder was in line with the barrel.

Masters fell back on the porch at the feet of Sophie, who appeared to have given Webb the blow which flung him aside and away from the first shot. Even as he rolled to his feet, Webb noted Sophie's unconcern with the situation, her blank look at Masters and at himself. She slouched back into the house as Webb rose and whirled to meet the woman who had flung the knife.

She was gone, as were they all. All, that is, save a small boy who apparently had been trampled to death when the crowd scattered.

All, too, except Louie, sickle under his arm, looking dully down at the boy.

Webb examined Masters first, saw that he needed aid quickly, and ran into the house to find bandages. One of the sisters came out of the parlor as he passed it.

"My land, Webb, what was all that racket?"

Webb gave her a hurried sketch, and she got first-aid materials while he telephoned the hospital for an ambulance. He reflected as he did so that Masters was becoming a regular customer, as the result of accidents. He reflected, too, that this was the second time Masters had nearly killed him—accidentally.

He ran outside again, to examine the boy on the lawn. He felt a cold sense of shock when he saw that Louie was gone, and that he was not in sight in either direction along the street. The shock of Louie's vanishing so suddenly was greater than the discovery that the boy was dead.

"Louie," he said to the sister who had curbed the bleeding of Masters' shoulder, "the gardener. He was here only a minute ago. Did you see where he went?"

"Don't pay him any mind," she snapped. "All he knows is what he's told. My land, Webb, don't worry about Louie. Try to think about yourself. This is only the beginning."

VI.

Miss Emily's good eye followed Webb's pacing before the cold parlor fireplace. Miss Gertrude sat beside her, folded fragile hands creamy against her black satin dress. Miss Margaret played with a bundle of little sticks on the corner table.

"Webb!" Miss Emily exclaimed presently. "You are doing yourself no earthly good. You must relax."

"Gracious, yes," Miss Gertrude added. "If you make yourself sick, we'll have to dose you with castor oil."

Webb turned and faced them, feet widespread, hands locked behind him. "When a bunch of men come after you for something you haven't done, it's not easy to relax. What happens next, is what I'd like to know."

"What happens next will not affect your conduct," Miss Emily said. "You have set yourself on a path. You must stay there."

"But you saw—" He broke off. "Or did you? I didn't see you around when they were here. I saw Sophie. She saved my life, I guess. But I didn't see any of you."

"We were away—on business," Miss Emily explained.

"But I didn't see you go. I didn't see you come back."

"Gracious, there's more than one door in this old house," said Miss Gertrude. "Do we have to go out the front every time we leave?"

"No, ma'am. It's none of my business what you do. But I started to say you can't just ignore something that is going to kill you. If you do, you wind up dead. Maybe they're right; maybe I am nuts. Maybe I did annoy that girl in a fit of insanity, and don't remember. Maybe I'd better go have myself locked up."

"I have no sympathy for anyone who brims over with self-pity," Miss Emily snapped. "All you need is a good physic. That will put you in a better frame of mind."

"And it was indirectly my fault that little Harold Eagan was killed by the mob. What happens on that?"

"The mob didn't kill him. His heart must have just stopped. There wasn't a mark on him."

"I'll be blamed for it, though. You watch."

"Gracious, Webb!" Miss Gertrude broke in. "Why don't you brace up? You know what has

to be done to square yourself with people here. Why don't you do it?"

"Because I'm scared! I don't mind admitting it. I'm no hero. I did what you said, and look at what happened. I've acted as right as I know how, and I'm called a mad killer. I haven't killed anybody, and I'm not mad. Why should people think I am?"

"Go up to bed, Webb. You need rest. Nothing else will happen tonight."

"How can you be sure? As soon as they get over their shame of running from one man with one gun, they'll be madder than ever. I want to be ready for 'em if they come again."

"You said you were scared, and now you're ready to face them. That doesn't follow."

"I'm afraid of being afraid, too. Maybe that's why a lot of people get killed for nothing. If they were smart, and ran, they could live. But if I run, everybody will think I attacked that Hillman girl. I'll even think so, that it happened in a fit of insanity. The only way I can hold on to anything is to stay and face it."

Miss Margaret took her hands away from the sticks which had fallen into an eccentric pattern. "Masters must die," she said.

Miss Gertrude nodded, but Miss Emily was looking at Webb and seemed not to have heard the pronouncement of the blind and deaf sister, whose thin face offered almost angelic contrast to her grim prophecy.

Webb caught his breath. Up to now, each prophecy, uttered by whichever sister not concerned in the conversation of the moment, had been involved in his own affairs. Was this? And how could she know? He looked grimly at Miss Gertrude.

"Are you playing games with me?" he demanded.

"What on earth—" Miss Emily began.

"No, Webb," Miss Gertrude interposed. "We are not playing games. Gracious, we're just taking a natural interest in you."

"But these predictions. How can you make them? They scare me, whether they're true or not."

"They're true, all right."

"But how can they be? Nobody can see into the future."

"A true clairvoyant," Miss Emily said, "can visualize the pattern of life. Each thread in the big pattern is tied to an individual. Some of the threads cross all the others, that is, the actions of some individuals affect the entire race. But some of the threads are short. The true clairvoyant, I say, can visualize the pattern, and follow the individual threads. She sees the twists and turns up to the end, and knows what will happen."

"I don't believe it. There's no pattern in this screwy situation I'm in."

"Oh, yes, Webb."

"I still don't believe it. I'm going for a walk. I'm confused. But—" He faltered, thought for a second. "Maybe I better stay off the streets."

"It's perfectly safe—tonight," Miss Emily said.

"Well, I'll take your word once more. We'll see. I need some air."

He walked down Lexington, in the general direction of Kay's. This is really like a dead city, he thought. The houses are dark. I'm all that's alive. Nothing moves, except whispers in the trees, and—

There's nothing in this dark. That isn't a Something by that tree, it's just a shadow. It's just a shadow. It's just a shadow.

That's all. Those aren't footsteps behind me. Because when I look, nothing is there. Nothing. There isn't anything to *be* there. You can see people, and if you look at where you hear footsteps and see nothing, then nothing is there. Nothing. Nothing.

I'm not afraid.

That *flop—flop—flop*. That's a tree limb. But —there isn't any wind. There must be a wind. I just don't feel it. All the noises are wind sounds. I can see nothing is there. It's the wind. It must be.

Stop this, you damned fool. Why the hell are you running? That wasn't a hand on your neck, it wasn't fingers. It was a— It was a— But it *felt* like fingers.

That's what it felt like.

Where are you going tonight, Webb Curtain? Did I say that? I didn't say anything. Who did? What did?

Where are you going, where?

"Hey, you! Stop! I'll fire!"

The command snapped Webb back to reality, to recognition of the lighted intersection—First and Main. How had he got off Lexington? He quit running.

He watched Andy Ames, big leather-faced constable, holster his gun and amble away from the bank's vacant doorway.

"What's eatin' you?"

Webb's legs went rubbery with reaction. He put his hand against the lamp-post for support, sucked in rasping breaths.

"Just—getting—some exercise."

"You was goin' so fast, I didn't know you. Almost potted you in the leg. Hadn't oughta run like that."

"Yeah, Andy."

Webb was sickened and puzzled by his hysteria. Not for years, since he was a little boy, had he known fear of the dark. This experience

was more vivid, more blood chilling, than any he remembered as a child. Was this evidence of the insanity charged to him by the town?

"I'll walk along with you," Andy said. "Wanta talk to you. Where you going?"

"Nowhere in particular. Loring's, maybe, if Kay's up."

"O. K. Listen, son, lemme give you some advice. Pack up and leave this place. Things are happenin' around here, and you're behind 'em, whether you like it or whether you don't. You're blamed for 'em, and somethin' bad's gonna come off if you don't go away."

"But I live here!"

"Don't give a hoot. You been doin' things no decent young fella oughta. If Bessie Hillman'd press charges for what you done last night, I'd throw you in jail up to your armpits."

"I didn't do anything to her!"

"Well, I admit maybe you didn't. When it come right down to it, she said she wasn't too sure if it was you or just somebody looked like you. But you're the one all the ruckus is roilin' around. You better beat it."

"Listen, Andy. You're a cop, supposed to protect citizens. Well, why don't you? Where were you when they came after me today?"

"I was away on business," Andy said with dignity. "If I'd 'a' been there, things would 'a' been different."

"So now you're going to protect me by running me off?"

"It ain't that, son. If I was sure they was wrong about you, I'd take you into my own house. But I ain't sure. Maybe you are crazy, a little, but not crazy enough to put away. Runnin' the streets at night looks like it. But still, I think everybody would be happier if you scrammed. That's all I got to say, son."

"What if I don't scram?"

"Then I reckon you just gotta take the consequences, and there'll be some."

"You won't give me any help?"

"I got to obey the will of the majority."

"A mob!"

"That's all in the point o' view, son. They ain't a mob in their own eyes. They're just citizens, cleanin' up their community."

"I'll think it over, Andy."

"Do, son."

Webb continued toward Kay's, wondering about his nightmarish experience on the dark street more than this new threat hinted at by Andy Ames. Such experiences shouldn't happen to normal persons. True, in his imaginative childhood he had known of the peopled dark, had been threatened by his parents as most children are threatened. But tonight he had seen Things, actually seen them. The question was, were they real or inside his own head?

He dropped this trend as he passed the big white house of the Eagan's. A plain black hearse, unlettered though everyone knew it belonged to Gorham's Undertaking Parlors, was a solemn reminder that death had struck here.

The face of the house revealed nothing, but Webb knew that behind the drawn blinds the grief-stricken family gathered in one of the rooms while Pearly Gates Gorham and his assistant performed "the sacred rites of closing the eyes, of composing the limbs, and of preparing for burial the empty vessel of the departed soul"; knew that tomorrow Pearly Gates would rub his hands with fat satisfaction and say to his assistant: "Neatest corpse I ever laid out."

Will I be a customer? Webb asked himself. What will come out of this?

At the Loring house, lights burned, and Webb entered as usual without knocking.

"Hello, everybody," he called.

Kay's father, a plump man of fifty, put his book on a table beside his chair, got to his feet, and looked coldly at Webb. Mrs. Loring made nervous motions with her pretty hands, shot an anxious glance through rimless spectacles at her husband.

"Where's Kay?" Webb asked.

"My daughter is in her room."

"Oh? Well, don't bother to call her. I'll go back."

"Wait!" Mr. Loring called as Webb turned. "You are not a welcome caller here any more, Curtain. I must ask you not to annoy my daughter further."

"Annoy? What are you talking about?"

"I will not discuss the matter, sir. My word is enough, in my own house."

"You mean she doesn't want to see me?"

"I mean she will not see you."

"I'm afraid I'll have to hear it from her, Mr. Loring."

"Must I order you out of the house?"

Webb stared in honest bewilderment at this man who had taken him fishing as a boy, had bought him ice cream at the Bon Marché, had given him toys for Christmas, an air rifle among others.

He turned without a word and went out. He felt a deep pain, his mouth drooped, his steps dragged as he went back to the Parkers. No ties held him now. After the arrival of his baggage tomorrow, and the return of Masters' brief case, he would take the first train.

Whether Kay or her father had gone over to the others was unimportant. No matter whose decision, he had lost contact with the person who believed in him more than all the others. She had always believed in him, he recalled suddenly.

On his way to the *Sentinel* the next morning, Webb had a feeling of invisibility. Such persons as he met looked through him, as if he didn't exist. Motorists, many of whom he had known for years, drove past with their eyes on the road. Even shopkeepers did not look up as he passed, or, if they did it was when Webb's eyes were elsewhere.

He did not detect a single eye noting his passage, and for a moment entertained serious doubts of his existence. Had he died? Were these the spiritual remains of personality? This was worse than being obviously avoided. How dreadfully lonesome is an invisible man, he thought.

Not until he passed the marble-splotched façade of Gorham's Undertaking Parlors did his conviction of living return. For Pearly Gates, just inside his door, seemed highly aware of Webb Curtain.

He looks, Webb thought, like a vulture watching a dying calf. But why did all the others not see me? Or was that part of my imagination, like that horror last night? And why should Gorham look at me like I was a job coming up? Is that imagination, too? Does he look at everybody that way? Well, he'd better take a good look at me. It's his last.

"Good-by," he told Pat Cain. "You don't owe me any money; I haven't done any work. I'm taking your advice. I'm hunting a hole."

"Sorry, Webb."

"Me, too. So long."

At the railroad station, he failed to see his baggage on the long board platform or inside the baggage waiting room.

"New York train in yet?" he asked the agent.

"Nope."

"Overdue, isn't it?"

"Yep."

"I'll wait."

The ticket agent went back to his magazine, and Webb sat on one of the benches designed for hunchbacks. Aside from the intermittent rattle of the telegraph, no sound broke the stillness. No trains passed, no telephones shrilled, no travelers came in.

Webb dozed, woke with a start, and eyed the station clock in amazement. He had slept for nearly three hours. He was a light sleeper, and wondered how the scheduled trains could have passed without waking him. He went back to the wicket.

"Where's my baggage?"

The agent raised his head. "On the streamliner, I reckon."

"You mean they didn't unload it?"

"Ain't come in."

"Why not?"

"Wreck. Six hours late."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Didn't ask me."

"When will it be in?"

"Couple hours, I judge."

Webb went muttering out on the platform, and paced between the red baggage truck and porcelain drinking fountain. Sunset came, and stars peeped out of the twilight. The station lights blazed, streaming in amber shafts through windows and door on the platform.

A mockingbird flung harsh notes from a chimney somewhere across the tracks; the whistle of the Red Dog Mine summoned the night shift; house lights winked on toward town; somewhere down the track a black shadow moved, stopped, disappeared.

Far off in the hills wailed the cry of the streamliner, and tracks before the station presently began to hum. The agent came outside and pulled the rattling truck to the spot where the baggage car should stop. The streamliner slid around the near hill and came in with a hiss of steam and clang of bell.

Passengers turned bored looks from the little station back to their activities: books, magazines, cards, conversation. One passenger alighted.

Webb noticed only that she was blond, tall, and lithe. He was more interested in trunks and suitcases which were flung out of the baggage car and piled with efficient violence on the truck.

The agent pulled the truck away, the conductor high-balled the engineer, the bell clanged, the drivers spun, caught, and the streamliner pulled out.

Webb took Masters' brief case from his trunk, checked his baggage, and hurried away. As he crossed the tracks to a short cut through back ways to the hospital, he remembered the shadow he had seen, for suddenly a series of shadows materialized into solid fists that struck and boots that thudded against his ribs.

He fell face down at the first rain of blows, shielded his face with his hands, his ribs as best he could with his elbows. For a short time he was aware of individual blows and kicks, how this was more or less painful than the last, and shifted to avoid permanent injury. After what might have been a minute or an hour, the night became simply a blur of shock and pain through which he heard as from a great distance: "Let this be a warning, Webb Curtain." Presently, even his fading sensations died.

Dawn was a cloudy glow in the east when he was conscious again, but the sun was an hour high before he had crawled to the station platform and awakened the night man. Aid was summoned, and as he was loaded into the ambulance, he saw a white-beared tramp walk off the tracks to the spot where he had been attacked and pick up the brief case. He made a weak and incoherent

effort to call attention to this, but the intern put him off with cheerful sympathy.

"Sure it hurts. But we'll fix it up."

VII.

"I've got to go," Webb said to the nurse. "I got to get out of here."

"Now just relax," she soothed. "You'll feel better presently."

"I feel all right now! Listen, there's a fortune at stake. Give me my clothes. You can't keep me here against my will."

"You mustn't get excited. Those ribs need rest. You can't get out of bed before tomorrow."

"I'll go out of here in this nightgown, nurse. Make it easy on yourself. With or without clothes, I'm going out."

He raised himself, wincing with pain, and some of the starch went out of the pretty girl. She shifted worried eyes at the door, set her thermometer tray on the bed table, and took Webb's shoulders in gentle but firm hands.

"You mustn't do this. Please!"

He was too weak to fight. He sank back on the pillow. "Listen," he pleaded. "Honest, this is more important than ribs. I lost something when I was beaten up last night. It's worth a million dollars. I've got to go get it."

The worried expression in her eyes was replaced by sympathy, mixed somewhat with sadness and pity. She put a cool, tender palm on his forehead. "Close your eyes. Relax. Don't worry about an old million. There's plenty more."

Webb flung off her hand with weak savagery. "I'm neither hysterical nor delirious! Ask Court Masters. He's still here, isn't he?"

"Mr. Masters cannot be questioned."

Webb remembered Miss Margaret's "Masters must die."

"What's the matter with him? He's not dead?"

"Oh, no. But his condition is critical. Critical, but not serious. His progress is satisfactory."

"Nurse, I've got to go. I've been here three hours. Maybe that's too long. I don't know. But any more time in here and I'll be too late. This is serious. Honest it is."

"I'm sorry, but doctor's orders—"

"The hell with the doctor! This isn't jail. I'm paying for whatever I get here. You can't hold me unless I'm under arrest. I'll sue this hospital for every nickel it ever hopes to get!"

"You surely won't get any better this way. Wait. I'll ask the doctor."

She rustled out on cat feet, and Webb tried moving his taped torso into experimental positions. Sweat stood out on his forehead, but he knew that with help he could manage. Larry would help. Larry would always help.

The nurse returned, with his clothes. "We wish no responsibility in this matter. You must waive all claim for damages which may result from your action."

"O. K., O. K. Dump 'em on the bed. Take a nickel out of my pants pocket and telephone Larry Owen. You better take several. You might have to make more than one call."

He gave her a series of numbers, which she wrote on the back of a prescription pad, and struggled into his clothes while she was gone. He gave up trying to tie his shoes and fell painfully back on the bed until the nurse came back with fifteen cents in change.

"He's on his way."

"Thanks. Will you tie my shoes?" When this was done, "Now help me out to the front desk, please."

He signed the waiver, and leaned back in the soft chair. He forced a grin. "You're swell," he said.

Two dimples flanked a smart, white line of teeth. "You're not so bad, either. Just foolish."

"I'll spend some of that million in your direction."

"Do."

Larry galloped in, eyes wide with amazed worry, hair wind-twisted. "I hurried," he said, and Webb suppressed a shudder at the picture Larry conjured. "What happened?" To the nurse, he said, "Oh, hello."

"Never mind what happened," Webb said. "I'll tell you later. We got to see a man about a package. Help me out to the car."

After three halting, supported steps, Larry said, "Shucks, this is easier;" and picked Webb up, carrying him with arms under knees and shoulders outside.

Webb flung involuntary tears from his eyes, leaned gasping against the seat, motioned weakly ahead, and whispered, "Railroad station."

Larry was still panting from the exertion of carrying Webb when they came to a smooth, fast stop at the depot. Webb caught his first breath that was not stifled by wind pressure.

"Run into the station, ask the agent if he saw a tramp with a white beard, pack on his back, carrying a satchel about three hours ago. If he didn't, ask him where the guy would likely go. See if there have been any trains through."

Larry was back in two minutes. "No trains, no tramp. But there's a jungle out by Turkey Creek. Maybe he went there."

"Let's get going!"

Webb customarily relaxed when Larry was at the wheel, but on this occasion he closed his eyes as Larry hurled the car through scattered traffic. Singing wind told him something of their speed, and an irregular *swish—swish—swishswish* identified cars which Larry skirted by a paper thick-

ness. When the exhaust was a steady roar, and the wind a constant pressure against his outside ear, Webb opened his eyes on the speedometer needle, pushing ninety-three.

"Don't hit anything, for Heaven's sake," he shouted. "I'm a sick man."

"At this speed, it wouldn't make any difference," Larry cried cheerfully.

A tree-blind crossing outside, the city limits made a *sssst!* in Webb's ears as he caught a glimpse of a State cop kicking the starter on his motorcycle. He thought that for an instant he heard the howl of a siren, but if so the wind snatched it away.

Their headlong rush decreased. Larry did some light and artful braking, ducked to the left between two oncoming cars, and slipped down a narrow dirt road into a clump of trees beside the stream as a siren came out of their wake, howled across the Turkey Creek bridge and faded from earshot.

The hobo jungle was a small flat clearing near the water, with a rude fireplace of blackened stones in its center. An old man lay apparently asleep at the far edge, his white head pillowed on his "bindle." He sat up as the big car purred to a stop, eyed his visitors with sharp, gray eyes, tugged thoughtfully at his white beard with a corded hand.

"You are not officers," he said, when the motor died.

Webb stifled the harsh words on his tongue tip, was abashed by the cultured courtesy of the tone.

"No, sir. I am looking for a brief case. I believe you picked it up near the station early this morning. It's mine, and I'll pay a reward for its return."

The old man got to his feet and came to the car, carefully skirting a thorn bush.

"No reward is necessary, young man. If I had your brief case, I'd gladly return it. However, I discarded it about halfway between here and the depot. I tried to open it, in hopes of finding its owner's name, but it was locked. I slit a seam with my knife, but it seemed to be lined with a flexible steel screen. A sturdy piece of workmanship. I did not wish to add to my load, and threw it into a clump of hawthorn to the right of the tracks as you approach the station from here."

"I'll go get it," Larry said. "You wait here."

He trotted along a path, up the right of way, and disappeared down the tracks. Webb looked at the old man.

He was in khaki, faded but clean with many washings in streams. His manner was calm, and in his gray eyes was an objective, analytical curiosity. His white hair was long and slightly sunburned. His face, as much as was not covered by beard, was a deep wrinkled brown. His hands were lean and brown, with clean fingernails.

"You're getting along in years, to be barging around the country on freights, aren't you?"

"I am only seventy."

"Most men die by then."

"They are supposed to die. I am not."

"Oh? How come?"

"I don't know the real reason. I only know the fact."

"I don't get it."

The old man moved to a flat rock near the thorn bush, sat down and rolled a brown cigarette.

"I mean this, young man. I wander across the country because that is my destiny. It was part of my destiny when I turned to my class twenty years ago. I looked at that collection of youth and thought how I had spent mine instructing others. 'It has occurred to me,' I told them, 'that life is outside, in the hills, the plains, the forests, the cities. I must live it.' I walked out of that classroom and began to wander. I never went back. That was part of my pattern."

"Do you really believe that we are restricted by a pattern?"

"How can it be otherwise? Why is this man rich, this, poverty-stricken? They are both human beings. Accident of birth or environment? Then why are they not reversed? Why not this man in silk hat and tails, this, in rags? They are never reversed."

"That's because it just happens that way."

"Happens? No. Think of the complex series of circumstances that brought you and me here together at this moment. Blind chance? I think not. Anything we know, which operates blindly, will die. But the world moves forward. We do not retrogress along evolutionary lines, we progress. We have direction. Toward what, I don't know. Directed by whom, I don't know. But the fact is obvious."

"I don't believe it."

"Nor do many. The fact, the truth, however, remains, whether your or my belief is correct. I knew three sisters, old maids, who had a touch of vision. One of them—"

"Was their name Parker?"

"Why, yes. Do you know of them?"

"I live with 'em."

"How odd. I should think they'd have died by now. How is their health?"

"It's hard to tell. All right, I suppose."

"I see. I started to say that one of them explained to me that each life is a thread in a pattern which includes all humanity. Each person, then, moves along the path outlined by the thread. He may struggle, he may acquiesce, but he ends at the appointed place at the appointed hour."

"Yeah, I know. They told me that. But I don't believe it because it gives us no choice. We do

what we want, or we fail, through no fault of our own. Initiative, effort, and all such mean nothing. We might as well obey our impulses."

"You can't obey your impulses if you are not meant to obey them. If you are meant to struggle against them, you will struggle."

"Then why not relax, and let everything ride?"

"You will, if that is your destiny. If not, you will fight circumstances. It doesn't matter what you think or believe. Your thoughts, beliefs, actions, are cast for you."

"I'd hate like hell to believe that, uncle. It makes me somebody's toy. Whose?"

"I don't know, my boy, I don't know. Here comes your friend. He found it, I see."

Larry plunged down the right of way, came puffing along the path, and Webb saw that thorns had left bloody tracks on his hands. He tossed the scratched brief case in the seat, and got behind the wheel.

"Where now?"

"Back to town. Sorry about the hands."

"I'll live." Larry grinned at the old man. "When you throw things, mister, you throw 'em."

Webb adjusted himself carefully in the seat, wincing at each movement, and held himself as motionless as possible while Larry backed out onto the highway.

"There's no hurry, now," Webb said. "We might meet that cop."

Larry grinned. "He's still chasin' us, I bet. He ought to be somewhere in Colorado by now."

"What did you do with that ticket?"

"Turned it over to dad. What happened to you, Webb?"

Webb told him. "I want to take care of this brief case first. Then we'll call on Andy Ames. Somebody is going to catch hell. Andy may not know who beat me up, but I think everybody else in town knew yesterday. They avoided me in a new way. Scared the devil out of me. Go to the hospital, Larry. We'll find out about Court Masters."

Larry spent five minutes inside, came out and mimicked the nurse. "His condition is critical, though not serious. He is unable to receive visitors."

"Now what the hell will I do about this satchel?"

"What's in it, Webb?"

"I don't know. Something damned important, according to Masters. Well, let's find Andy."

The big constable was not too excited.

"What I told you, son. You ought to 've gone."

Webb gripped the arms of the office chair. "So you knew about it, too!"

"Didn't know anything of the kind. I would've stopped it. You name 'em, I'll pinch 'em."

"I didn't get a look at 'em. But this is what worries me; they said this was only a warning. I can't take another experience like that."

Andy spread his hands on the desk. "Well, what can I do, son? I can't arrest everybody in town. They've all got it in for you. I can't even give you a bodyguard. I got no men. Like I said, you'll be better somewhere else."

"I can't leave, Andy. I've got some business to clean up, and I don't know how soon I can do it."

"Well, I can't offer anything, son."

"All right. I'll protect myself, then. I won't get caught in dark places again, and if anybody wants hard luck, let 'em try something else. They'll get a dose of No. 4 buckshot."

"Don't you go carryin' a gun. I'll throw you in the jug."

"I'll carry it in the open. It won't be concealed."

"Makes no difference. You ain't fit to tote a firearm. People'd scream their lungs out. Tell you what I'll do. You stay outa sight for a while. I'll sashay around and see what I can pick up. If I can find who jumped you, I'll let you know and you can file charges."

"You should do that, anyway. I'm not staying out of sight any longer than these bruises make me. They've got me mad. I may not even leave after I get my business done."

Larry helped Webb into the car again, and drove him home. Sophie admitted them. The sisters were not in evidence. When Webb was in pajamas and in bed, he said:

"Larry, call Kay. Ask her what goes on, and to come see me. Then look around and see if you can find a shotgun. It may be in the room across the hall. Masters had it."

Larry came back presently, but not alone. He was followed into the room by a neat, middle-aged man who wore his hat at a jaunty angle on silver-gray hair, a man with buttermilk eyes.

"This guy came to the door, Webb. Don't seem to be anybody else around, so I let him in. Said it was important."

"Hello, Mr. Potter. You do get around."

The colorless eyes were without expression. "I am happy to see you, Mr. Curtain. Do you live here alone?"

"No. But skip the biography. What do you want?"

"Ah, yes. My business. You have an object, I believe, which belongs to Mr. Court Masters?"

"Did he tell you that?"

"That is beside the point. I—"

"Excuse me a second. Larry, what about Kay?"

"Yeah. I'll tell you later. Want me to wait outside?"

"Stick around. Nothing secret here. Well, Mr. Potter?"

"I have a client who will pay a huge sum for the object, Mr. Curtain."

"You can't expect me to have much faith in your clients. What was his name, Grach? I saw what happened to him, and the job I was offered."

"That was unfortunate. It won't happen again."

"Even if I had this object, I couldn't sell it without Masters' permission."

"I understand that, Mr. Curtain. That can be arranged."

"Not if he's unconscious."

"Mr. Masters will be able to receive visitors tomorrow afternoon. The business can be concluded."

"How do you know?"

"That is also beside the point. My client will arrive during the week, with a certified check."

"I'm curious about something, Mr. Potter. What is this gadget you're so anxious to buy?"

"I? I am not anxious to buy it. It's of no use to me, Mr. Curtain."

"What is it, then?"

As Mr. Potter looked at him with no expression—not a deepening line around the eyes, not a twitch of the humorless lips, not a movement of the relaxed hands—Webb thought: I'm getting used to little chills lately. Women who are blind and deaf make true prophecies, things chase me at night, and an odd man looks into—my soul.

"I don't know what it is," Mr. Potter said.

"Then what's all the fuss about?"

Mr. Potter didn't answer the question. His strange eyes fell on the ring which Miss Margaret had given Webb.

"May I look at your ring?"

Webb spread his hand, and Mr. Potter bent over it. He looked for a long time, turning it this way and that. Webb understood his absorption, for the tiny scissors buried in the heart of the

yellow stone induced queer feelings in the beholder.

"Where did you get this?" Mr. Potter asked.

"It was a gift, from a friend."

"I—see." Mr. Potter straightened. "Very interesting, very, very interesting." He paused. "I'll see you later."

He turned and walked out of the room.

VIII.

After a short silence following the departure of Mr. Potter, Larry sat heavily on the bed and turned puzzled eyes to Webb. "What *is* all this?"

Webb grimaced at the shaking caused by Larry's abrupt move. "Don't rock the boat, for Heaven's sake!"

Larry jumped up, apologetic, and the bed shook again.

"Will you light somewhere?" Webb groaned.

"Gosh, I'm sorry, Webb. I didn't think." Larry pulled a chair near the bed. "Where does it hurt the most?"

"Everywhere. Listen, Larry. Run downstairs and get that brief case we left in the hall. We'll try to see what goes."

"You're going to open it?"

"I'm going to try."

While Larry was gone, Webb relaxed as much as possible against the pillows and closed his eyes. He had some thinking to do.

Mr. Potter, the Parker sisters, and Court Masters. Pat Cain, Tom Eagan, and Larry Owen. The train wreck, which delayed his baggage and caused him to be beaten. Bessie Hillman. Andy Ames.

He had tried to get away from this town where he was almost a pariah. Circumstances seemed to have conspired to prevent him. He had tried to stay, then, and face down the ridicule, the slight contempt. And circumstances seemed to force him out. His second attempt had brought about the present condition, and now the illness of Court Masters, Webb's possession of the brief case, the arrival of a buyer next week—circumstances again.

What, he asked himself, will I do? It seems a simple thing to catch a train—for anybody else. But when I try, things happen. A girl screams in the dark, a cop stops me, a train wreck— What about that? I must check on it. Pat Cain will have the story.

Is there a pattern? he asked. No. Can't be. People have their ups and downs. Nobody runs on an even keel, unless that old tramp who is an ex-professor. Same theory as the Parker sisters. Puppets.

The Parker sisters. Three eccentric old maids who play name games. And where do they go? Where were they when the mob came after me? Where are they now? Their going somewhere is something like the picture of the blind man carrying the cripple. They must make an odd procession.

A warning, somebody said last night when they were booting me. Does that mean that if I don't get out of line again—at least, according to their notion—nothing will happen? I can stay? I'd like to. Kay.

Kay. Don't think of Kay. What's taking Larry so long? He can drive me over to see Masters tomorrow.

Maybe I am loopy. Would a sane man have thoughts like these? Be chased down a dark street? Please, God, don't let that happen again. And how did poor Bessie get bruised?

Webb broke off his thoughts as Larry hurried in, white-faced, carrying the brief case.

"Webb! I saw something. You know that maid?"

"Sophie? What about her, except that she seems a trifle cracked?"

"The parlor door was open, Webb. As I passed to get this case, I noticed she was standing in a corner by the fireplace. Well, that was all right. But as I went on down the hall to the chest where we'd put this, it started worrying me. Something was wrong with the way she looked."

"I noticed that the first time I saw her."

"But this was different. So I went back and stood in the door for a long time. Webb, she didn't move a muscle. It was like somebody had put her there, like you put a broom in a corner."

"Did you investigate?"

"Me?" Larry said. "Me?"

"Well, relax. She's probably resting, in her peculiar fashion. Let's see the satchel."

It was of heavy leather, with an efficient-looking lock. One corner was slit, and Webb could see the fine mesh of a metal screen. He poked this with his finger, then looked at Larry.

"This is a portable safe."

"Maybe we can pick the lock."

"We can try. What is it the cops and crooks always use, a hairpin?"

"Don't look at me! I don't use 'em!"

"Well, find something."

Webb peered at the lock, turned the case this way and that, tried to bring all his reading knowledge of locks to mind. Larry opened dresser drawers, grunted with satisfaction, and brought out a rusty hairpin.

They worked on the lock. They bent the hairpin in various shapes until their fingers bled. They twisted, turned, shook, and cursed.

"Crime doesn't pay," Webb said at last, licking at his fingers. "Turn on the lights."

He dropped the brief case beside the bed, and Larry punched the light switch.

"I better go home, Webb. You want anything else?"

"No. Oh, I forgot. Did you call Kay?"

"You're not gonna like this, Webb. She had to give her old man her word not to see you till he said O. K. But a cousin of hers came to visit last night, and is coming over here in the morning with a message. After she told me that, she started to cry, and hung up."

Webb looked at his hands on the bed cover. He didn't see them; he only looked.

"Will you take me over to the hospital tomorrow afternoon?" he asked after a long silence.

"Yeah. So long, Webb. If you need me between now and then, call me."

"Thanks."

Don't think about it, Webb told himself fiercely. Let it ride. Sit back, see what happens.

He stared at the tapestry. He didn't see it, either. At some time during his staring, however, he noted that the border was incomplete. It covered two sides only, the right side and the bottom, as if the tapestry were designed as the lower right-hand corner section of a larger piece. He stared some more, unseeing, until the calm approaching footsteps of one of the sisters broke into his miserable reverie.

"Come in," he called to a brisk knock, and the sister who knocked gave him a look of sympathy mixed with exasperation.

"My land, Webb! Can't you keep out of trouble? Do you hurt much?"

"Nothing serious, Miss Emily."

"I'm Margaret, Webb. What have you done for yourself?"

"Rushed around all day."

"Well, you need some liniment and hot soup. You stay right still till I get everything. I never saw such a boy for trouble. You've got to feel well for your visitor."

Webb blinked. "How did you know I have a visitor coming tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? I'm talking about tonight. Mr. Cain telephoned. He's coming out shortly."

She bustled out, returned with lotion which she applied to his bruises with brisk hands and which sent a restful glow along his nerves. As she finished, Sophie entered with a steaming tray. She set this on Webb's knees, gave him her customary blank look, and went out. Webb ate while Miss Margaret watched him with an expression which he interpreted as fondly maternal. He felt a twinge of sympathy for these old maids, childless and kind.

"You're nice to me," Webb said.

"We have to be—now," she replied cryptically.

"What does that mean?"

"You're like one of the family, now. We've got to fight for you. But we'll win—I hope."

"Thank you, Miss Margaret. If ever I can do anything for you—"

"You can't, Webb. Nobody can."

"But why?"

"Oh, never mind, Webb. We're lonely, that's all. Once there were jobs we could do. But they said we weren't efficient, and now we have to do what we can find. But let's don't talk about it. Are you finished? Mr. Cain should be here any minute."

Any room seemed to shrink when Pat Cain came into it. He towered over Webb's bed and his flinty eyes had a slight twinkle.

"Well, my lad. It seems you had a work-out."

"Sit down, Pat. Thanks for coming."

"It isn't a casual visit, Webb. I've done an editorial, based on what a queer little man named Potter told me. I want you to check it for accuracy."

"Mr. Potter *is* a queer little man. He seems to have a lot of information, too."

"Listen to this."

Cain stood, read from typed sheets in his bull voice that almost rattled the windows.

"Gentlemen:

"A fine, careless word, that. Gentlemen.

"The laws of the land govern what a man may say in print. He cannot, with impunity, call another a skunk, a rat, a horse-faced idiot, or any similar descriptive terms. He may be sued in the courts.

"This does not imply that I would call the members of our local mob by any such name if I could. No, gentlemen!

"You will notice that the title of this piece is 'Unfinished Business.' Not mine. Yours. You have a few loose ends to clear up.

"You have killed a little boy, by your extra-legal action as a mob. The Eagan child died because you chose to interpret and administrate the law according to your lights.

"You have beaten and nearly killed a young man. You exercised care and caution, by attacking him at night and in force. That action, I assume, was covered by your constitutional right to the pursuit of happiness.

"Are you stopping there?

"How about that little lady who lives alone at the end of Elm Street? She is twisted with arthritis, and the door of her cottage is never locked because she cannot move well enough to admit her many visitors. Do you ignore her?

"Another suitable victim for your peculiar talents is Blind Ben. Would it not be an easy task to wrest his fiddle from him, smash it over his head, and kick him unconscious in the alley behind Hobe's Smithy, where he sleeps?

"Is he to escape?

"No more than four of you would be needed for that job, providing Ben had had a hard day.

"Your principal item of unfinished business, of course, is Webb Curtain. He is still alive.

"Through no fault of yours, of course. No. You have tried, twice. But he is alive, and, therefore, an item.

"A newspaper should be a clearing house for community sentiment, in addition to its more conventional functions. Very well, the *Sentinel's* columns are open to expressions of opinion as to how Webb Curtain should best be dealt with.

"It is sheer idiocy, of course, to put him in an institution for the insane—if he is insane—and cost the taxpayers hard-earned money. That is out of the question for this town. We can use that money for better projects: the Fireman's Ball, receptions for out-of-town politicians, new blinds for the city hall, a new coat of paint for our one traffic signal.

"Needless expense is out. We must economize.

"For the aid and guidance of those who will take advantage of space offered here, let us consider a few facts.

"Webb's mother and father were probably insane, at least temporarily. Normal persons do not wish to take their own lives.

"At the time of their death, a rumor began to circulate. 'Webb Curtain is crazy, Webb Curtain is crazy,' was the whisper through the town. Whisper? Yes—then.

"Not now. He acted with humility, he wanted to go away, he met an hysterical girl on the street. The whisper grew, and grew, and culminated in the roar of a mob which scattered like rabbits and killed a little child.

"Let's assume that he's crazy, a dangerous maniac. Should we be ashamed, then, to rid our community of such an influence? Does the man who kills a mad dog sneak up on it in the dark? Does the man who stamps on a poisonous insect wait for nightfall to cloak his identity?

"No. Then for the sake of our self-respect, let's come out in the open, if Webb Curtain is crazy. Let's stone him to death on the city hall steps, since we must economize. Stones are free. Let's have the members of the fireman's band, whose salaries we pay, provide appropriate music.

"Who is the sane man who will throw the first stone? Let him step forward.

"On the other hand, assume that the rumor concerning Webb Curtain is baseless. What to do? Save our self-respect, by all means. Justify our actions up to now, for it is one of the characteristics of citizens in towns like this that they can never admit they were wrong.

"Here is a solution. Let the whole town plead temporary insanity. It's nothing unusual, in this section of the country. It's even fashionable—after the event: lynching, persecution, whatever. Let's establish the new trend—before the event. Let us say that everything went red, we don't remember, we weren't ourselves.

"But let's deal with the problem like men in daylight, not cowards in the dark."

Pat Cain folded the sheets and grinned at Webb.

"I've been wanting a peg to hang those remarks on for a long time."

Webb looked away. He felt gratitude, but it was tempered with an apprehension of results which might grow out of the printing of Cain's words.

"Are you sure they won't take that stoning as a good suggestion? Or find a peg to hang me on?"

Cain snorted. "They'll crawl in their holes. They'll be afraid to move at night. Put yourself in their place. Would a public discussion of your nocturnal activities inspire you to increase them, act more flagrantly?"

"Maybe not. Pat, I appreciate this, honest I do. I could cry, even. But don't you think you're playing God just a little?"

"Not at all, Webb. I'm trying to right a public wrong."

"But look, Pat. I've never thought this out clearly, but it seems to me that an editor must necessarily develop a tendency to tell the public what it wants, rather than report what it says. Your editorial is maybe a red rag to the local bulls."

Cain pursed his lips, walked once across the room, and sat in the bedside chair. "Could be, could be. Would you rather I wouldn't print it? Its only purpose is to smooth out your situation."

"I don't know. If it'll help, I'm for it, naturally. But—"

"Tell me about your beating. My informant, Potter, didn't know any details, nor did the hospital."

Webb told him, and Cain glowered at the floor.

"That settles it. I'll elaborate my remarks a little on that beating. It isn't you, primarily, Webb. It's this thing we've been trying to stamp out of America for a couple of centuries. Mob action. There's a smell to a mob, literally and figuratively."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Pat."

"So do I. If you want your job back, Webb, it's there for you, at least till this condition is cleared up." He grinned. "Then, if you're inefficient, I'll fire you. In the meantime, you're helpful to my reputation as a crusading country editor, and worth just a salary to show up every day."

"Thanks. Before you go, Pat, what about that train wreck yesterday? If it hadn't happened, I'd have been gone in the afternoon."

"Just one of those mysterious things that happen to trains. Ran off the track. Nobody hurt. Well, I've got to get this piece into type. Drop

in when you can, and read your morning paper tomorrow."

Kay's cousin was named Millicent Lake, and when she walked into the parlor the following morning, Webb felt a click of recognition, and a click of—something else.

The recognition focused: she was the tall, lithe blonde he had seen get off the train. The something else became a lift inside his chest and a tingling of his fingertips.

Not only was she beautiful with violet eyes and a skin like fresh cream. There was a swing to her, a rhythm—the subtle beat of vital beauty.

He started to rise when Sophie ushered her in, but she waved him down and came to him on long swinging legs to shake his hand.

"Don't get up," she said. "I'm no lady. I'm Millicent Lake, who is Kay's cousin, and if you call me Millie I'll maul you. And how are you?"

"Out of breath," Webb said. "Who wouldn't be? Sit down."

"Thank you, sir. Are your bruises bothering?"

"I can walk, which I couldn't yesterday."

"Good! I have messages. My little cousin was somewhat incoherent, but my translation of the gist is that she still loves you and life is awful. She used up scads of words to say that, including a biased biography of you, but there it is in a neat package."

Webb frowned at the floor, then smiled at Millicent Lake, who sat, not sprawled, in the big chair.

"She doesn't have to take that from her father, does she? She's of age."

"Ah, but she does. She raised her family incorrectly. She feels a false sense of obligation."

The telephone rang, and Webb went into the hall to answer it. The hospital.

"Mr. Masters is asking for you," said a feminine voice. "He is much improved. If convenient, will you come?"

Webb explained the situation to Millicent.

"I'm at loose ends," she said, "and I have Kay's car. I'll drive you."

Webb climbed the stairs for the brief case and a light coat, and when they were in the familiar little coupé, Millicent continued.

"I started a line about families. Once I'm on that, just try and stop me."

"You mentioned a false sense of obligation?"

"Yes. If Kay dared live openly as she likes, her mother would go into a decline, and her father would bite his own nose with righteous rage. It's Kay's fault. If she had made it clear years ago that she was an individual, they would have recognized it in time. It's too late now. The habit's too deep. She's an adjunct to apron strings and . . . . and . . . what? Bootstraps? Not good. Look."

She waved a hand at Sunday churchgoers. They moved in family groups, in a sedate parade, men in sober dark suits and white collars, women in self-conscious finery, girls in delicate prints, boys sullen in ties.

"Once a week they purge themselves of the cheating, lying, backbiting they indulge the rest of the time. They define decency in terms of their own actions and beliefs they have acquired, and if their children do not conform to those actions and beliefs they are indecent. Too many, God help them, grow up believing in the sanctity of parenthood and pass the same narrow codes on to their children, regardless of changing times and manners."

She broke off and flashed a brilliant smile at Webb. "I didn't mean to make a speech, but you wanted to know why Kay allowed her father to browbeat her. Kay, my young friend, needs a great deal of education. I hope she is still young enough to absorb it. Now. What are we going to do about us?"

"Us?"

"Yes. Here we are, thrown together by freak circumstance. We're young, and obviously attracted to each other. Before anything starts between us, let's decide where we want it to go."

"Now? This is a little fast for me. Besides, I've got to go to the hospital. Three blocks ahead, two to the left."

She pulled away from the curb and drove at a fast, efficient clip. She had none of Larry's flair, but she was competent.

"Why," she asked, "do males shy away from frankness? They go around demanding it, and when it's tossed in their lap, they stand up."

"Listen, Miss Lake, you move a little too quick for me. I have to think about things. There's Kay, for instance."

"Naturally, Mr. Curtain, she's a factor. All I suggested was a discussion. Is this your hospital? Pretty, in a deadly sort of way. I'll wait for you here."

Webb was somewhat dazed as he approached the front steps of the blocky, white building. His daze was further increased as he saw Louie emerge toward him.

"Go here, go there," Louie was muttering, "that's all I— Hello, young feller. Seen you before, didn't I? Well, I'll see you again."

"I hope so, Louie."

At the reception desk, he made known his errand to the pretty attendant.

"Oh, dear!" she said. "Mr. Masters suffered a sudden relapse. I'm so sorry. He's—dead."

IX.

Court Masters is dead, is dead, is dead.

This was the theme in counterpoint to Webb's thoughts as he looked into the round blue eyes

of the receptionist. His thoughts touched on Miss Margaret's earlier prophecy: "Masters must die." They skirted the brief case and ethical conduct. They dipped at Mr. Potter. They circled Louie, once. Millicent.

"I'm—sorry—too," he said.

"Are you a relative?"

"No. A friend."

"We are anxious to contact a relative who will be responsible for the body."

"The least I can do," Webb said, "is handle the funeral expense. I'll turn the matter over to Mr. Gorham."

Pearly Gates Gorham, he thought, as he went out to the coupé. Pearly Gates Gorham—Corpses Laid Out Neat.

"You look like a ghost," Millicent observed.

Webb looked at her, and cursed himself. Cursed himself for the tingle at his fingertips, the lift inside his chest. This can't happen, he assured himself silently, it just can't. I'm faced with an important situation, and when I look at this blonde it isn't important any more.

"Why don't you go away?" he said resentfully.

She gave him a steady violet glance, said quietly: "We need a little talk. But what now? What's the matter with you?"

He told her the bare fact of Court Masters' death, directed her to the mortuary. He made his arrangements with Gorham, put a deposit into fat, white hands, and felt suddenly at loose ends. He needed to talk.

He halted as he emerged from the undertaking parlor. A man was talking to Millicent. Mr. Potter. She was signing a paper. Webb waited until the business, whatever it was, was completed, saw Mr. Potter walk away without touching his hat, and got into the car. He shot a suspicious glance at the shelf behind the seat, where he had put the brief case, relaxed somewhat when he found it unmoved.

Millicent waggled her head and made a whistling sound. "The strangest things happen to me. That little man has been trying to find me. He represents the legal firm of my Uncle Henry, who up and died without heirs. I am now with legacy."

"Congratulations," Webb said. "That little man represents more people."

"Oh? Since that makes no sense to me, I can only ask what do we do now?"

"If we're smart, we'll run from each other. That's the way I feel, anyway."

She stared down the street of blank store fronts where nothing stirred but a tiny wind devil, which whirled from one curb to the other and collapsed.

"From what I've heard of you," she murmured, "you seem to be running from something most of the time—with an almost supernatural lack of success. Why fight with the back of your neck? Why not face things?"

"Every time I face one, another springs up behind me. Like you, for instance. Why don't you go away!"

"What I like about us," she said, twisting a smile, "is our tender love scenes. I suppose this does complicate matters for you, and I'm sorry. But let's consider the complications. Aside from Kay, what bothers you?"

Webb began to relate some of his difficulties, in the bright sunlight on Main Street, and as he talked he saw Pat Cain come to work. The big editor unlocked the *Sentinel* doors and disappeared inside. As if this were a signal, Main Street began to awaken.

A small knot of men gathered in the second block before Runt's Pool Hall. They were a half dozen, mostly miners from the Red Dog night shift, including Flannel Shirt, and a couple of Tom Eagan's cronies. Now and then a broken word or phrase rode the light breeze to the coupé where Webb talked.

One part of his mind formed the tale he spun; the other analyzed the movements of the group which moved from Runt's to the *Sentinel*, where they held another conference on the sidewalk. This was so low-voiced that not a murmur reached Webb, despite the fact that they were only a few doors away.

"I wonder what that means," he said to Millicent.

It was answered by the men themselves. With one concerted motion, they faced the newspaper's doors, and Flannel Shirt shouted:

"Cain! Come out here!"

Webb reached for the door handle, but Millicent laid a polished hand on his wrist.

"Wait! See what they want."

"I think I know."

"But you may be wrong. Wait and see."

Pat Cain loomed in the doorway, and Webb leaned outside the coupé to catch his words.

"Well, citizens, what can the *Sentinel* do for you?"

"We've had about enough from you, Cain," Flannel Shirt growled. "You've called every man in this town a rat, a skunk, and a horse-faced idiot."

"That's a broad interpretation," Cain said. "But what about it?"

"This is what about it. Print a public apology, or take the consequences."

"Go to hell," Pat Cain said.

Webb was half out of the coupé when the first blow was struck, and with Millicent's "Be careful, you dope!" in his ears, he hobbled as rapidly as his bruises would permit toward the fight which now had two men on the ground and four swing-

ing, avoiding Cain's hamlike fists.

Webb flung himself at Flannel Shirt, and the crunch of his fist against sallow flesh brought a yell of pleasure to his lips. The tide of battle shifted, rolled briefly over him in a bare-fisted wave, and he was down.

As he shifted away from kicking feet, Webb caught glimpses of hurried action along the street. A few men boiled out of Runt's, and around corners came other men in sober dark suits. These met in seething knots, and shouts, grunts, curses, scrambled the Sabbath calm.

A pair of hands jerked Webb to his feet, and he gave Larry a nod of dazed recognition.

"Who do I hit, Webb?" Larry shouted.

"Anybody!" Webb cried, and swung on the nearest jaw.

It came to Webb later in coherent analysis, the emotion of the street. While he battered at twisted faces, was battered by random hands, he caught the sense of it only. Blind fury.

Fury is sometimes clean and white, cleansing, burning away the dross of a situation, he thought later. But this had a smell, and a sense impact from which he cringed. It rose from the large group before the *Sentinel* offices, from smaller clumps that writhed in the street, from men who fought singly.

This was the smell, the feel of a mob, and it was unclean.

Two revolver shots rang out, and a heavy voice cried: "Stop it, you damned fools! I'll plug you!"

Not instantly, but quickly none the less, the command brought quiet, and big Andy Ames stood on spread feet in the center of the street, hard-faced, a gun in each hand. He stood, Webb noted in some confusion, beside Kay's coupé, which Millicent had halted, with running motor, in the midst of the furor.

Andy motioned with his guns. "Line up, all of you!"

Those who were conscious stepped around and over a few who lay quietly, and gathered in a group near the spot where Pat Cain's fists had laid out seven or eight. They returned Andy's glare, some sullenly, some in foot-twisting shame.

"You're all under arrest," Andy Ames grated. "You'll appear at the next session of the court for hearing. I know you, so don't think you can get out of it. You're grown men, by damn, and fightin' like kids in the street."

"You're not pinching me!" cried a voice.

"Nor me!"

"Run along, Andy!"

"Shut up!" Andy roared. "I deputize you, Pat Cain, and you, Webb Curtain, to maintain order. Place any man under arrest that shoots off his face."

"I hope that loony tries to arrest me," Flannel Shirt snarled.

"Shut up!" Andy repeated. "Listen. I got a word or two. That girl that come after me told me how the thing started, and I've read Pat's editorial. This is a civilized town, by damn, and there won't be any more riots and disturbin' the peace, or I'll have soldiers in here. All of you go home, quiet, and when you cool off, have a meetin' if you got things to get off your chest. Whatever happens, it's gonna be done legal, an' decent, or I start scatterin' lead. Now bring these guys in the street to, and take 'em home if they ain't hurt too bad, or to Doc Barnes. But clear the street."

They dispersed according to their nature, swaggering, straggling, slinking, some with heads up, some with eyes on the ground, and Pat, Webb, Larry, and Andy were alone on the sidewalk.

"What happened?" Larry asked.

"*Erin go bragh,*" Pat Cain puffed.

Webb felt himself for new hurts, and found several. He shot a look at Millicent, who had drawn up to the curb, and smiled at her expression of concern.

Beside him, Larry said, "Gosh! She's pretty."

"Wanta talk to you people," Andy said.

Webb questioned Millicent with his eyebrows.

"I'll wait," she said, and he followed the trio into Cain's office, where the newspaperman rubbed his knuckles while Andy Ames took a stand in the doorway.

"It's my job to keep peace here," Andy said. "I've asked Webb to leave town for the good of ever'body, but it looks to me like that wouldn't help now. It would, maybe, a few days ago, but this ruction has lined up people on two sides. I heard what was gonna take place in a couple churches this morning. Preachers gonna give their congregations hell for sayin' Webb is crazy, with no more to go on than they got. So the men come out about the time this brawl started, and they picked their side."

"What happened, anyway?" Larry asked, and Webb waved him to silence.

"What we got to do," Andy went on, "is get the town back together. It's split, and you know how them things can build. First thing you know, a killin'll throw the business into out an' out war. We gotta prevent that, an' I think it's up to Webb, since the whole ruckus started over him."

"But what can I do?" Webb asked wearily. "I've tried everything I've been told. So I'm banged up again. There's no future in it."

"Well, maybe they'll hold a meetin' in the town hall, maybe not. But if they do, you better come an' talk to 'em. It's a kind of hard thing to handle, all right, 'cause they're not so much worried

right now about you bein' nuts. They're just mad and confused, an' they'll stay that way till somebody straightens 'em out. It don't make sense. First they looked at you with pity, and felt sorry for you in a nice kind of way. Now they hate you, an' you done nothin'. I dunno what you oughta say. Do you, Pat?"

Cain scratched his head. "I'm not even sure he should appear at a meeting, if there is one. Maybe he ought to be represented by somebody else."

"Well, you and him better figure out somethin', 'cause I don't like the way things look. A lot of guys got their heads cracked this morning, and they know who cracked 'em. They'll get back in any way they can at the one who hurt 'em. That'll just cause trouble, an' more trouble. I don't wanta hafta ask for troops in here. Martial law is a nasty thing for people's self-respect. But remember, you're under arrest, so don't leave town. And if this thing ain't worked out by the time court convenes again, you'll hafta appear."

Andy nodded and went away. Webb, Pat Cain, and Larry sat in silence for some time.

"I guess I might as well go back to work for you, Pat. I've got to stay here, anyway. What do you want me to do now?"

"Go to bed," Cain said. "You're so stiff you can hardly get your breath. Come in tomorrow, if you feel all right. Maybe I'll have something worked out."

"Can I hitch a ride, Webb?" Larry asked as he took Webb's arm. "I left my car home. Is that girl Kay's cousin?"

"That's right."

"Gosh! She's pretty."

Webb made the introductions, and they dropped Larry at the big green house on Elm Street. Larry had not taken his eyes off Millicent during the silent ride, and he continued to look at her as he stepped out of the car.

"Could I—well," he faltered. "I'd like to—"

"Certainly, Larry," she said kindly. "Pick me up about eight, say?"

"Thanks."

Webb looked back as they turned the next corner. Larry hadn't moved.

"Conquest," he said. "Listen, there's one thing we can get straight."

"Which way now?" she broke in.

"Go out in the country. To your left. I want to talk to you about Larry."

When they were in the open, on the white winding road, they were silent as the little hills flowed backward on either side. At the side road approaching the Turkey Creek bridge, Millicent cut off into the trees near the spot where the old tramp had been. She cut the motor, took a package of cigarettes from her purse, lit two, and stuck one between Webb's lips.

"Well? About Larry?"

"He's a swell egg, see? Don't hurt him."

"I don't intend to."

"You could, though, without intending. I've never seen him nose-dive like this before. After he met you, he even forgot to ask what the fight was about. He's fine, so don't let anything start unless you intend to do something about it."

"I promise. Word of honor. Anything else about Larry?"

"I guess not, except that he's always there when you need him. He's no ball of genius, but he's honest and loyal, which is more than I can say of some other people."

"Including us?"

"Including us."

They were quiet, and the gurgle of the stream reached them, forming a musical foundation for the fluttering of little birds in the trees and underbrush, and the occasional hum of tires on the highway behind. They smoked, and Webb clenched his free hand.

Millicent presently extinguished her cigarette in the dash tray, twisted toward Webb and tucked silken legs under her blue skirt.

"I have the queerest feeling about us, my young friend. I'm no visionary, and I don't believe in queer feelings. But I feel that we were never meant to meet."

"It was a swell idea, then," Webb said.

"But now that we have met, we have a problem. I felt that fire between us when I walked into the room this— Good heavens, it was only this morning. How time crawls. We've known each other a couple of hours, and I was just now wondering why we'd never kissed."

"We don't dare, for one thing."

"No, I suppose not. But we do have the problem. What are we going to do about it?"

"Nothing!" Webb exclaimed. "Absodamnlutely nothing. I've got troubles enough. Look, I wish you'd go away. Honest I do. Sure, I love you, I guess, and all the rest of it, but I'm scared. There's too much between us. It's like putting a match to a box of powder. Our emotion isn't sound, there's no base, no pattern of experience."

"Somehow," she mused, "I don't think I *can* go away. Financially, yes. I'll get my inheritance in a week, the little man said. But something is keeping me here, just as it threw us together. A few more experiences like this, and I'll be a pushover for the what-is-written-shall-be brethren."

They were quiet once more, and below the murmur of the afternoon Webb could hear his heart, beating a trifle faster than normal.

Kay, he thought. Kay.

"Will you take me home?" he asked. "I'm full

of aches and pains besides these which we cause each other."

She backed onto the highway, which was beginning to fill with Sunday traffic, and presently stopped before the prim tourist home.

"We haven't settled much, have we, my young friend?"

"We haven't settled anything, except that you're going to be nice to Larry. Nice or nothing."

"I won't forget. When will we see each other?"

He looked into her violet eyes, and away. "As I said before, if we were smart—"

"All right, don't be grim and feverish. I've a feeling we won't be able to stay apart. Can I be of assistance in getting you inside the house?"

"That's sweet of you, but I can manage. Will you tell Kay . . . uh—"

He halted, blankly. How could this girl carry that kind of message to Kay.

"I know what to tell Kay," she said. "You still love her, and life is awful. *Au 'voir.*"

After he had been helped into bed by Miss Margaret, Webb stared at the ceiling, empty of thought or emotion. Not until nearly dark did he remember, with a lurch of his heart, that he had left the brief case in the car. He was much too tired to go downstairs to the telephone. Anyway, as she had said, there was the feeling that they wouldn't be able to stay apart.

X.

The sisters convened in his room shortly after dark, and Webb suffered a nostalgic reminder of his own family group in the living room before the double suicide. Miss Margaret and Miss Emily busy with needles were like his own mother knitting under a corner lamp, and Miss Gertrude playing with the bundle of sticks on the low table they had brought was like his father at a crossword puzzle.

You never know, he thought, till they're gone. You never know.

On those occasions when he had gathered with his family at night, he had for the most part been impatient to get away. He had kept one ear cocked for the telephone, the other for somebody in a car to take him to Al's Lakeside Tavern for a dance or a drink of the rotgut Al bootlegged to local minors at fifteen cents a shot.

Yes, he had been impatient, and had stayed inside only when necessary. Tonight, however, he was grateful for the presence of these women who had practically adopted him. He ran a leisurely, friendly glance over each, identical with her sisters in lanky body, thin kindly face, white hair, creamy hands, black satin and lace.

They're all right, these Parker gals, he thought. They're O. K.

"Where did you live before you came here?" he asked.

Miss Emily laid aside her needles, turned blind eyes and a warm smile to him.

"Not anywhere, really, Webb. We move around quite a bit."

"My land, yes," Miss Margaret said, her eye on Miss Emily's lips. "Sometimes I think we're part flea."

"I ran into a friend of yours yesterday. Lord, was it only yesterday? Anyway, he said he knew you. He's a tramp, who was a college professor once."

"I think I remember him," Miss Emily said, and added something to Miss Margaret which sounded to Webb like Phase Two. "An intelligent human being, that," she said to Webb.

"Well, I thought he was a little screwy on this fate business. I'd hate to feel that whatever I did was because Somebody, or Something, had planned it that way. He repeated almost the same words one of you used the other night, about threads in a pattern. No, thanks, not for me."

"Why not, if the final goal was worth while?" Miss Emily asked.

"Well, all right," Webb conceded, "but if it's true, my beef is that we don't *know* it. If I'm taking orders, I want to know what the orders are."

Miss Gertrude raised her head from the pattern of sticks she had arranged. "The moon is full," she said.

Webb puzzled over the remark, made no sense from it. "There just can't be any order in things," he continued. "Too many events take place because of factors which never had any connection. Like me, and Kay's cousin. She walked into the parlor downstairs this morning, and the world is different."

"My land, Webb!" Miss Margaret exclaimed. "What difference if things are planned or not? They happen to you, and that's all life is. It doesn't do any good at all to sit around and try to figure it out. If Somebody or Something, as you call it, is running things, you won't know what's coming unless you've got a contact. And if things are all accident, you can't possibly know. Stop your complaining, or I'll make you take some castor oil. Do you good, anyway."

Webb grinned at her, and stopped the remark he had ready as the doorbell rang downstairs. Presently heavy feet pounded up the stairs, and Larry was admitted by Miss Emily. Webb made the introductions, and questioned Larry with his eyebrows.

"I got the girls downstairs, Webb. We're going out to Al's and dance. Kay says you got to come."

"Larry, I'm honestly falling apart. I'd like to,

but I don't think I'd better."

Miss Gertrude again raised her head. "Go," she said. "The moon is full."

"My land, yes, Webb! You don't have to dance. You can sit and watch. Don't be a stick-in-the-mud. Get along with you. We'll go out so you can dress."

As Larry helped him with his clothes, Webb thought of Kay and Millicent on the same party with him. "This will be a cozy evening," he said.

"Gosh, yes! Say, that Millicent is swell. I wish I could think of something to talk to her about."

"She does well enough for both of you."

When Webb was in the rumble seat with Kay, and they had effected an uncomfortable reunion,

Millicent turned as they traveled out of town at a leisurely pace, for Larry, and handed Webb the brief case.

"You forgot this."

"Thanks." Webb stuffed it down by his feet.

"What's that?" Kay asked. "I've never seen it before."

Webb gave her a brief sketch, and headlights of oncoming cars showed her narrowed dark eyes, her fine brows drawn to form two vertical wrinkles above the bridge of her nose.

"And you forgot it?" she asked.

"Things were rather hectic today."

"They must have been," she murmured. "Millicent was whirling when she got back after ever so long. What do you think of my cousin?"

"She's all right. But look, let's talk about you. How much longer does the cloistered-nun act continue?"

"It isn't that, Webb. I agreed to stay away from you. I'm not being forced."

"And why did you agree?"

"Well, daddy said we ought to be sure about you, and the way you— Well, about that Bessie Hillman—"

"Do you believe that?"

"No, not really, but daddy said it *might* be true, and it would be a good idea to know."

"And did you get permission for tonight? What are you doing, analyzing, preparing a report for father?"

"No, Webb. I broke my word, and if they find out about it, they'll be unhappy. So will I."

"I don't mean to beef, Kay. Everything has piled up on me at once. I have to hang on to myself to keep from going—"

He broke off, shied away from the word. Kay maintained a tense silence, also, and as they passed between moonlighted hills there was only the pur of the motor, the whip of wind, and Millicent's murmur in the front seat.

As Al's Lakeside Tavern came into view, Kay broke the quiet between them. "Another reason I'm here, Webb. Remember I told you the Parker sisters said something bad was going to happen to us, but maybe it could be sidetracked? Well, let's sidetrack it."

He took her hand, pressed. "Let's."

A handful of customers rattled around Al's tavern like shot in a tin cup. Al himself seemed not to worry about the fact that this place which had been designed to accommodate two hundred had never seen more than fifty customers at one time.

He gave these kids the run of the place. They danced to a juke box on the vast floor under dusty crêpe-paper decorations. They drew their own beer or mixed a drink, when Al took a nap

in the cubbyhole office. But they paid, and he lived.

He came from behind the long bar to the table to which Webb had hobbled between Larry and Kay. He widened his black eyes in a brief flash of admiration for Millicent's earthy beauty, and twinkled at Webb.

"Run into a door?" he asked.

"Termites," Millicent explained.

Al bowed with mirth, black hair falling across his forehead, hands resting on the bulge of his aproned stomach.

"That's a drink on the house, kids. What'll it be?"

"Beer."

Larry led Millicent onto the dance floor among a scattering of high-school boys and girls from the town, many of whom were starry with drink, and all of whom were flushed with the incredible exertion inspired by the music of Shaw, Goodman, Nichols, Andrews soeurs, et al. Kay watched Larry and Millicent flow smoothly into a ballroom rhythm, then turned to Webb.

"Well?" Her full mouth tipped up at the corners.

"Here we are again."

"What *do* you think of Millicent, Webb?"

"I told you I thought she was all right. Want me to put it in writing?"

"Don't snap at me."

"Sorry. I'm a sick man. What do you want me to think of her?"

"It isn't that. I don't believe you're telling me the truth when you just say she's all right."

She broke off while Al set beer on the checkered oilcloth, chuckled "Termites" and threaded a path through couples agitated by "Blue Footed Duck."

"Every time you looked at each other tonight," she went on, raising her voice above a white-hot trumpet, "I could feel a spark. It was sort of bright, and fierce."

Webb raised his glass, sipped the beer. "What's all this leading up to?"

"To this. You and I haven't got that kind of spark. We grew up together. So if you and she both want that, I'll— Well, step out of the picture."

"Don't be stupid. I don't want any part of her. Nor she of me. I said she was all right. That's what I meant, and no more."

Kay smiled suddenly, with lights deep in her dark eyes. "O. K. Here we are again."

They touched glasses, heard the clink as the music cut on a staccato chord. Larry and Millicent came back to the table, and Larry helped her into a chair.

"What a rat race," Millicent said. "When I was the age of those kids, three or four years ago, they called me Malted Milk Millie. Well, they hold their liquor like little ladies and gentlemen. Bless you, children, I drink to you."

A girl in red, white, and blue socks put a nickel in the juke box, and couples surged from tables to the floor again. Millicent turned to Larry.

"Dance with Kay. Webb can't. He's doing well to sit up."

As Larry and Kay moved onto the floor, Horace Beecham, the town's cabby, came through the front door and watched the musical gyrations from one end of the bar.

"I've been thinking about us," Millicent said. "I have things to say."

Webb looked into her eyes, purple under the amber lights, and waited.

"Let's go outside," she suggested.

"Why?"

"Oh, the moon is full, and we'll be, too, if we sit around swilling beer all night. There's a lake, too, no?"

"More of a pond."

"I can talk better under those conditions."

"I don't know," Webb demurred. "Kay is—" He shrugged. "Oh, well. Come on. You'll have to help me on the sharp curves."

Webb tried to catch Kay's eye, but she and Larry were in the midst of intricacies they had learned together in school, and he piloted Millicent to a long veranda which faced the narrow body of still water that gave the tavern its adjective. Moonlight was motionless on the water, rippling on the slender fronds of cattails which feathered the bank. He and Millicent sat on a low stone bench and lit cigarettes. They puffed in silence, and when the music stopped inside heard the night chorus of pond frogs.

"It isn't easy to put this into words," Millicent began. "About a year ago, something happened to me. I was very nearly killed by a man who had an apartment next to mine in New York. He was a screwball, and I mean screwball, inventor. But in his fumbling fashion, I suppose he was a genius. His name was Murray George. I'll never forget it."

Music broke out again inside, and she waited for the fortissimo introduction to give way to a solo chorus.

"He thought he was in love with me," she continued. "I guess that's what he thought. I can't think of anything else to explain his action. He had never spoken more than three words to me until one evening he banged on my door in a perfect fever of excitement. I lifted an eyebrow at him, and he babbled something about the greatest discovery of all time, and would have me in to see it. I went.

"You should have seen that apartment. A rat's nest would get a seal of approval in comparison. Never mind about that. He led me through debris

to a drawing desk, where sheet after sheet of paper held the most incredibly neat drawings of something that was 'way over my head.

"'I can give you the world,' he said. 'I lay it at your pretty feet.'

"That was laying it on, because my feet are too wide to be pretty. He went on to explain, in incomprehensible terms, how this invention would change the world if properly exploited. And he knew a man, he said, who could raise any amount on it. So when, he wanted to know, do we begin?

"Am I boring you?"

"Not yet," Webb replied.

"I'm almost finished. I looked at his drawings again, pretending to be interested but really thinking how many jumps it was to the door, and I said, 'Very pretty, but is it art?'

"The man went mad. At my tone, I guess, which wasn't what a feverish lover-from-afar would like from his lady. But it wasn't much of a step from his normal state to madness, anyway. He snatched up some kind of knife with a curved blade and lunged at me.

"The point of the knife hit the center of a locket which a sweet old lady had given me a few days before. It was heavy, with a tree root worked on it in gold, and a place inside for a picture. She came into the office where I was a receptionist, said she liked my looks, and gave me a present.

"Well, if it hadn't been in the way, I'd have been a spitted chicken, because the force of the blow knocked me halfway to the door. When I hit the halfway mark, I was a cinch. Did I run! So did he. I zipped out of the apartment house, as I was going too fast to make a right-angled turn into my own apartment, and he came howling through the streets after me until some kind-hearted gentleman tripped him and kicked his face in. I heard later they put him away in a pixilated penthouse. Are you beginning to wonder—"

"Just what this is all about?" Webb finished. "Yes, a little. Tell it your own way, though."

"At that point in my short and colorless career, the something I mentioned happened. I was at loose ends. It was a queer, empty feeling. I felt I didn't belong. The faces were strange, the noises too loud, the sun too bright, the wind too cold. I pulled out of it to a certain extent, and reached a normal condition of bewilderment."

"I know what you mean. I've had it for several weeks."

"Well. Today, everything was all right. I thought it was you. Maybe it is. I don't know. I do know that I'm all right again, or nearly so. I can cope again. So this is good-by, my young friend."

The music stopped, and Webb looked at her. The moon had moved so that a portion of it showed under the veranda roof. It made rippled silver of her hair, contrasted black and cream shadows on her face. Webb shut his hands, hard.

"I don't know what to say, except—maybe it's better. Maybe."

"It is, it is. Kay is sweet, and you can be comfortable with her. But not us. We'd never be comfortable. This fire. We feel it now. It would consume us. Pleasant, I grant you. Smart, I won't say."

Webb covered his face with his hands, shut his eyes hard in an attempt to get a mental focus.

"This is new to me," he said. "This feeling. I didn't know there was such a thing. It scares me."

She stood, tensely. "Let's go in. If we stay here any longer, you will kiss me, and then we'll never say good-by. Come on!"

Larry was alone at their table, moody, aggrieved.

"Gosh, where've you been?"

"Out," Millicent said. "Where's Kay?"

"She's gone home. Horace Beecham drove her in. She said something funny about stepping out of a picture. She said you'd know what she meant, Webb."

Webb slanted a wry smile. "I never saw so much nobility. The place is knee-deep in renunciation."

"Oh?" Millicent said. "So that's what happened?"

"Yeah. Lightning struck twice tonight."

"What are you *talking* about?" Larry demanded.

"Life, my young friend. Which is always a mistake. Let's talk about another glass of beer. Then you will take us to our respective homes, no?"

Larry made motions to Al. "Say, Webb. Right after Kay left, a guy came in looking for you. A little old guy, with funny eyes. I guess I was kind of short with him. I didn't know where you were, and didn't want to look. But he said he'd wait for you at home."

Webb suddenly saw his way clear. "I'm leaving town tomorrow," he said. "For good."

"But you're under arrest," Larry protested.

"I'm still leaving."

XI.

As Larry's taillight disappeared down the street, Webb approached the slight figure pacing the sidewalk near the ornamental iron gate. Webb carried the brief case in his left hand, steadied himself on the fence with his right.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Potter?"

Mr. Potter watched Webb approach the last ten feet. "You have the object, I see. Yes, Mr. Cur-

tain, I wished to inform you that my client, H. William Karp, will arrive tomorrow evening, and I wished to make certain that you were ready to negotiate."

"I have a change of plans in mind. I'm getting out of this place tomorrow. Why can't I meet your Mr. Karp at whatever spot you choose, and complete the deal on my way?"

After a short silence, "Which way are you going?"

"Away, is all. Direction doesn't matter. Which way is he coming?"

"From the west."

"Then I'll go to California. Couldn't you arrange a meeting by telegram?"

"I can. I shall. The rendezvous will be the railroad-station waiting room in the county seat at noon tomorrow."

"How will I know Karp?"

"It isn't necessary that you recognize him. You will be carrying the object, and you will be limping yet tomorrow."

"Sounds O. K. He'll have identification?"

"He will have the check."

"Which is good enough for anybody. Good night."

In his room, Webb packed his single bag and tried to push a troubling memory out of his mind. But despite his efforts to concentrate on other pictures, thoughts, impressions, he returned mentally to moonlight and silver, black and cream shadows on Millicent's face.

He sat on the edge of his bed, fully dressed, and shook his head. Still the picture remained.

His consciousness was a battleground, he knew. And on the big issue he was flying the flag of surrender. It was easier to run. Opposing factions in the town would get together once he was gone, despite Andy Ames' gloomy predictions. His and Kay's situation seemed complicated beyond possible return to normal. This new emotional entanglement was impossible to manage. It was easier to run.

But still the picture remained, the picture on Al's veranda.

One part of him said: run, complete the deal, live your own life, forget this mess; another part: but what about Millicent?

He groaned half aloud as he got to his feet and went downstairs to the telephone. The voice that answered his ring was feminine, with no overtones of sleepiness.

"Millicent, I guess I can't take it. I want to see you before I leave. Can you come over in the morning?"

"Yes. Good night."

No good-bys, he thought, as he tossed in his bed later. They always complicate matters. Besides, Andy would pinch me.

He had not seen the sisters when he moved out on the porch the next morning to wait for Millicent. They were around; he had heard them moving. But he had made no effort to find them. No good-bys.

Millicent arrived in Kay's coupé, and Webb joined her at the curb, carrying his bag and brief case.

"I am going to be flung into the street," she said. "What a night! That girl can have hysterics over more territory than anybody I ever saw. You're a louse, Mr. Curtain. I'm a louse. There is nothing wrong with Kay that a couple of years of growing up won't cure. And you're running away from her, and I'm helping you."

"If you're in so bad with the Lorings," he said, "how come the car?"

"I stole it. I figured your aches and pains could use a little transportation. Why did you want to see me?"

"I want you to go with me."

"Oh?"

He got into the seat, stowed his baggage on the shelf.

"Drive away from here. Out toward Al's. I'm heading that way."

"I'll have to buy a toothbrush."

"You can buy one studded with rubies if you like."

He gave her a short history of the brief case since it had crossed his life, and told her of the deal he expected to complete at noon.

"We can go anywhere, live anywhere, in any style."

"We're a couple of fools, my young friend."

"Now what?"

"Human beings can't live constantly at the high pitch of excitement we feel together. I'll deliver you, but I'm not going with you."

"You've got to. You can't help yourself."

"Ah, but I can—I hope. Listen to me. I want to grow old at a normal rate. I want to be a nice, gray-haired old lady with an airplane of her own, and maybe a couple of grandchildren. So good-by."

"But with all the money I'm to get, we can make some kind of adjustment."

"No. I couldn't leave today, anyway. I haven't received my legacy yet."

"You can wire a forwarding address. We can leave Kay's car in the county seat, and buy one of our own and whatever else you need. Mr. Karp is paying a whole mil—"

"Karp, did you say?" Millicent broke in. "Is that his name?"

"Yeah. H. William Karp. Why?"

The coupé slowed, came to a stop on the crest of a small rise. Millicent turned off the ignition, set the brake, and gave Webb a steady glance.

"What's in that brief case?"

"I don't know," he said. "I told you—"

"So help me," she said grimly, "though I love you, I'll strangle you before you'll deliver anything to that man. I'm a strong, healthy girl, and in your condition you're no match for me."

"What's all this?"

"I know of him. I saw him once. I feel as sure that as I am alive and in love, nothing that man will pay heaps of money for will do you or me any good. Or anybody else we ever heard of. The deal is off."

"You can't dictate to me."

"I not only can—I do. Make your choice. You may be throttled, and so break my heart, or back to town, and I take charge of the brief case."

Webb had no answer. He simply stared.

"My dear," she said softly, "I'm serious. I was never more serious. I sound silly, I know. But I have a compulsion. I cringe when I think of you dealing with him. I swear that you shan't."

Webb continued to stare. She was all softness, with a shadowy smile, little lights in her eyes, yet the feel of her unwavering purpose came through.

"This is crazy," he said. "It makes less sense than anything else. You haven't given a single reason."

"I know. My reasons are vague and hard to state. I only know that Karp is dangerous. During that aimless period I told you about last night, I ran into him by accident, heard a few things also, by accident. He has diplomatic connections which, to say the least, are unhealthy. If I weren't a natural conservative, I would say slimy. Well?"

"You're being melodramatic."

"That's one of my faults, an unshakable will to melodrama. Except this is on the level."

"I'll go back, if you're going to make such an issue. But I won't give you the brief case."

"I'll take it."

"But what would you do with it?"

"I shall decide that for myself. I'm sorry, my young friend, if I've damped our glow. But as I told you, I can't help it. I have no right to run your life to any extent, yet here I am at the wheel. Anyway, I don't think the glow is damped. This is quite aside from our personal feelings."

After leaving his bag in his room, Webb walked to the business section. He had declined Millicent's offer to chauffeur and wait for him. Part of his refusal came from a desire for exercise. Another part grew out of bewilderment, resentment, and helpless rage.

He felt that her attitude was empty of logic, but knew that she was capable of physical violence to gain her point. The dividing line between his fierce emotion and hate was thin, and as she drove away with a casual wave, he teetered on the line.

He shrank from physical contact with her; that was part of his fear. He also shrank from accepting dictation from her, because of their acute struggle for domination. He was sullen as he walked to town with a slight limp.

A shock of pleasant surprise jerked his head as he passed Michaelson's grocery and the genial Irishman called:

"Hello, lad. How are you?"

"Wh-why, fine, th-thank you," Webb stammered at the round red face by the cash register. "How are you?"

"First rate, lad."

What gives? Webb asked himself as he continued. Am I over my social leprosy?

As he passed Cunningham Photos, Raddington Machinery, and Gorham's Undertaking, his spirits were further lightened by hails, nods, smiles from the proprietors, customers, and an occasional passer-by. All of his troubles, the past events, his present complications, seemed to pale in importance.

This was all I wanted, he thought. Just to be accepted. Just to be a part of things. If you're one of the boys, you feel like working things out. It's only when you're outside the fringe that you don't care.

Even the slightly contemptuous stare from Flannel Shirt through the window of Runt's failed to dim his sudden happiness. You had an enemy or two anywhere.

"Hey, Curtain!"

The hail was from behind. It was not friendly. Webb turned, saw young Tom Eagan come out of Runt's, grim purpose on his handsome features.

"I haven't had time to get around to you," Eagan said.

"How come you're not working?" Webb asked.

"I got fired. I think that was on account of you, too. I'm gonna settle a few things with you. Come back in the alley."

"There's nothing to settle, Tom."

"The hell not! My kid brother got killed on account of you, you beat up our kitchen maid, and I'm out of a job. Come back in the alley."

"I'll take it here, whatever it is."

Two or three stragglers came out of the pool hall and stood within a few feet, watching without expression. These were joined by Pearly Gates Gorham, whose fat face, though serious, still wore a frozen, professional smile.

"I don't like to get in jail," Eagan said, "but it'll be worth it. Put up your hands."

Webb stood motionless. "I'm not going to fight you, Tom. It wouldn't settle anything. I'm sorry about your brother, but it wasn't my fault, whatever you say. If you're going to do anything, get it over with. I just don't care any more."

Eagan's advancing steps were halted by Gorham's fleshy hand. "One moment, please," he said courteously.

"Leave me alone, Pearly," Eagan said levelly.

"Thomas," Gorham murmured, "you must not touch that boy. I am not a violent man, for I deal with the end result of violence, and it has made me cautious. But I swear that if you lay a hand on Webb Curtain, you will regret it. Exceedingly. In the first place, he is a physical wreck, as the result of two beatings, in which I suspect you had more than a casual hand. Even if he were in excellent condition, however, with no drawn look about the eyes, with no bruises which I know must exist, you would not touch him. This city has seen enough of senseless injustice."

After a short pause, "Well, I don't fight cripples," Eagan muttered. "But he'll get well, and we'll see. I'm telling you, Pearly, and all the other long-hairs in this town—we don't want Webb Curtain here. There's enough of us to make him leave, and enough of us to take care of anybody that don't like it. So watch yourself."

He turned, marched back into Runt's. Gorham smiled at Webb. "The only time people act logically," he said, "is after they are in my professional care. By the way, your friend Masters—do you want a public ceremony? You may see the remains when you like. A beautiful piece of work. He seems only to sleep, as perhaps he does."

"Do it as privately as possible," Webb said. "I'll be in sometime today. Thanks for your help."

"A pleasure."

Webb dropped into a chair in Pat Cain's office and waited while Cain listened to what seemed to be a long monologue. Finally, Cain said, "O. K., Andy," and hung up the receiver. He looked at Webb.

"Well, that's that. The meeting is on. Tomorrow. We've got to figure out something for you to say."

"Why, I got the impression things are all right again," Webb said.

He related his experiences of the morning, including the brush with Tom Eagan. Cain nodded, but waved at a stack of mail.

"I invited opinions in that editorial. I got 'em. For the most part, they admit that you personally got a dirty deal. But they also contend that whatever has happened, you're at the bottom of it. They don't like the alleged attack on Bessie Hillman. They don't like the street fight. They don't like the Eagan boy's death. They feel generally that it ought to be threshed out in the open, and gentlemen will check their firearms before entering the meeting."

"I still don't see how it can settle anything. No charges have been brought against me. How can I offer a defense? How can you prove sanity by talking?"

Cain drummed his desk thoughtfully, squinted his eyes at the wall.

"I have a notion, Webb. If you take this line everybody will go home happy."

"I don't believe you, but what is it?"

"You plead temporary insanity, brought on by the shock of your parents' death. The thing that sticks in their craw more than anything else is the attack on the Hillman girl. Your attitude on that is that something snapped inside your head, and you couldn't help it."

"But I didn't touch her! I remember perfectly. I had a few doubts, the next day or so, but I know now. I won't admit to that."

"Who cares whether you actually did or not? That isn't the point. She wasn't really hurt. She was just scared. Nobody will prosecute you for it, and you can smooth it out with only a few words."

"I won't do it."

"Well, what do you suggest?"

"I don't know. I can't see any point to the meeting."

"Andy Ames has it figured rather soundly. They aren't concerned with the question of your sanity. The mob action on two occasions has scared the solid citizens. They don't like it, and they'll take action if the cause isn't removed. Most of them feel that you're the actual cause, in some remote fashion. They're confused, afraid, and a little angry. The big helloes you received this morning were from a small minority. If you'll look through my mail, you'll see that the majority still feel standoffish."

"All the same, I don't go around chasing women."

"Look at it this way, Webb. You can arouse their sympathy by pleading acute shock from your parents' action. Most of them are parents themselves, and it makes 'em feel good when anyone shows parental influence. It makes 'em a little smug, thinking that parents really have a place in the scheme of things. It won't hurt you any, and it'll smooth out the rough spots in your present condition. Once you swing their sympathy to you, a few words to the effect that you're sorry and you won't do it again will sell 'em. Then get a little tough, and pretend you think you were treated unjustly, and you'll have 'em crying down their shirt fronts. Maybe somebody will even nominate you for mayor."

"Pat, I've told you how I feel about it. I will not confess to something I never did. If I do that, they'll remember, and regard me with suspicion. Every girl I'd meet on the street would fidget, at least."

"What will you do, then? Just get up there and stammer?"

Webb considered the problem. What could he say, except that he was unhappy, mixed up, and physically injured. Protestations of sanity were always taken as evidence to the contrary. Injured innocence would only get a laugh.

"All right," he conceded. "I guess it's the best way. I don't like it, and I won't plead insanity of any kind. It's going to be shock, and grief, which God knows is true enough. Let's hope it doesn't start a riot when I say I slugged Bessie at midnight."

"I'll be there," Cain said quietly, "and a few others."

When Webb left the *Sentinel* for home, he indulged in a piece of self-analysis which further confused him. As Cain had pointed out, confession of merely frightening a girl would do him no harm, especially since he had a strong emotional peg to hang it on.

Why, then, did he shy away from the admission?

Was he afraid that he had suffered a temporary aberration? Had those vague doubts on the day following the event been subconscious truths? Censored by his will to forget, but truths? Truths which would substantiate the town's opinion of him?

He tried to get an honest answer from his mind, and failed. It would answer yes, it would answer no, it would answer maybe, and in each answer was the disturbing quality of dishonesty.

He remembered clinging to the lamp-post while Bessie fled into the dark, screaming. But the event had seemed so trivial, compared to other pressing problems at the time that his memories of what might have taken place were blurred.

He gave it up, unhappily, as he neared the Parker residence and saw Mr. Potter approaching along the sidewalk. Webb waited by the gate.

Mr. Potter showed no emotion. "You failed to keep the rendezvous, Mr. Curtain."

"I got sidetracked," Webb said. "I started, but I didn't arrive."

"I—see. Mr. Karp will be here late this afternoon. Will you set a meeting place?"

"Well—the fact is, Mr. Potter, I don't have the brief case."

"Where is it?"

Webb considered. Millicent had said she would use her own judgment. "I don't know," he said honestly.

"I—see."

Mr. Potter turned and went down the street. Webb entered the yard, and threw another glance in the direction in which Mr. Potter had gone.

He was not in sight, and as Webb went into the house, he reflected that Mr. Potter hadn't seemed to be moving fast enough to have disappeared so suddenly.

XII.

When he went into the prim, neat parlor, Webb caught a glimpse of Sophie through the half-open door leading off the hall opposite the parlor. He remembered Larry's white-faced confusion, and felt a twinge of the same emotion.

Only for a fraction of an instant did he feel the emotion, nor did he stop to investigate. He entered the parlor with the thought that Sophie possibly rested in that strange posture, and that nobody had really stood her in a corner for future use.

The sisters greeted him, and he sank gratefully on the sofa, where he watched their fingers busy on needlework, and the idle motions of the blind and deaf sister turning and returning the tiny hourglass on the marble-topped table.

He skimmed the tapestried walls again, and felt once more the wide historic sweep of their kaleidoscopic design. Details he had never noticed impressed him briefly: a light in a church tower, a blond husky throwing a hammer at a giant, a deserted ship under full sail, a slight man who stared from an island at the sea.

His eyes became fixed and unseeing as he considered how the line of his life had twisted and turned since these old maids had entered it. A short time, true, but he felt as though he had known them forever. Yet there was no warmth, really, in their association. Miss Emily-Margaret-Gertrude had given him no affection, and he was not sure they had any to give. But they had treated him with a sharp kindness, and he was grateful without quite understanding the depth of his gratitude.

"Could I ask for some advice?" he said suddenly.

The sister who was blind stilled her flying fingers and raised her face; at her motion, the second sister gave Webb an attentive look.

"I'm in a mess, and I don't quite know what to do."

He told them about Kay, and Millicent, and went into detail on his feeling of confusion in the matter. He described his childhood, told how Kay was nearly always within reach, and he told of the flame between him and Millicent. He related incidents in which Larry figured strongly, and expressed his deep feeling of friendship for the boy who had always been a sort of man Friday to him. He told of the recent parental ban which separated him and Kay, of the surreptitious meeting, and of its consequences. He confessed to his and Millicent's attempted flight from this bewilderment, and its frustration, although he did not name the cause.

When he had done, the sisters were silent for a few moments. Presently, she who could see said, "I am afraid, Webb, that the problem is out of our province. I'm sorry."

"What do you mean, province?"

"My land, Webb!" snapped the blind sister, "you can't expect three old maids to give you advice about love! Whoever heard of such a thing?"

Webb grinned. "They usually have more advice than anybody else."

"Well, we're honest!"

The third sister laid aside the hourglass. "It's finished," she said.

Webb smiled tolerantly. They had had him going, once, by the way the blind and deaf sister would drop prophetic remarks into a discussion. This was the second, hand-running, that seemed to have no meaning connected with the present. The others, he concluded, had been coincidence. He felt a certain relief, and realized that their contention that the pattern is set beforehand had been causing him some subconscious trouble.

"Well," he said in a lighter tone, "I'll work it out somehow. That question seems to be giving me more trouble than the others. One thing I've done. I've reached the point where I'm not very worried about what other people think. I'm about as sure as anybody can be that I'm sane, and it doesn't worry me a lot that I'm confessing to a lie in public tomorrow. At least I think it's a lie, though sometimes I wonder. At any rate, you're partly responsible for my regeneration, and I want you to know I appreciate it."

"We did what was necessary," replied the sister who could see.

"Another thing, Miss Emily"—Webb hazarded the name, and when he was not corrected felt pleased—"if I was a little off my base back when they said I was, I'm not now. I'm not the same person I was then, so it doesn't bother me any more. I just now realized it. I was worrying myself sick over whether or not I *was* nuts, when the important question is whether I *am*. The answer to that is no, and I feel all right again."

The telephone rang, and Webb went into the hall.

"Webb," said Larry's agitated voice, "I want to see you right away. It's important."

"Well, come on over."

"Right away, Webb. And thanks."

Webb blinked at the thanks, and went up to his room. Larry arrived immediately, a Larry with troubled eyes and aimless hands that dropped Webb's brief case in the wastebasket.

"Where did you get that?" Webb barked.

"Huh? Oh, that. Millicent told me to give it to you. Said you forgot it again."

"You saw her?"

"Yeah, until a few minutes ago when she had to go to the bank to sign for some money somebody left her. She gave me the brief case then, and said to tell you she'd see you later. That's—Well, I want to talk to you, Webb."

"Well, get on with it. Don't stand there with your chin hanging over. What's the matter?"

"It's about Millicent, Webb. You— Gosh, you got Kay, Webb. You don't need—"

"Two? No. One's enough. You can have her, best wishes from me."

"But she don't talk about anything but you, Webb. And she's coming to see you this afternoon."

"All right, Larry. I'll break it off."

"If you don't want to, Webb, just say so."

Webb stared, curled his lips. "If any more people get noble, I'll cry. Now beat it. I'll call you later."

"I'll be at home, Webb."

Millicent came later. Miss Emily showed her in, gave the pair a disapproving look, and pointedly left the door open when she left them alone.

Webb felt a subtle difference in her. Whereas before she had a sense of high adventure in her stride, she now walked like ordinary mortals, with her feet on the ground. Whereas before her violet eyes had deep, exciting lights, they merely glowed, now.

She was still beautiful. Oh, yes. But it was a still beauty. No more turbulence.

He was not afraid of this Millicent. He only thought she was wonderful. No more than that.

She gave him a smile. "I had the queerest shock when your landlady let me in. I thought I'd seen her before. I guess not, though. Could a lady sit down?"

"Do. Why did you send back the brief case?"

She sat and smoothed her green silk print over sleek knees. She lit a cigarette, tossed the match in the wastebasket, and frowned thoughtfully.

"I don't know. It seemed awfully important this morning. Now it isn't important any more. Nothing is, very."

"Not even—us?"

"There's a strange thing, my young friend. The fire's gone out. The coals have died. So here we are, two strangers who were once in love."

She flicked ashes in the general direction of the basket and looked at him wide-eyed, calm, impersonal. Webb sat on the edge of the bed and returned her look in kind.

"Stealing a phrase from you," he said, "what I like about us is our constancy."

She smiled. It had a touch of sadness. "You know, I'm suddenly not having fun. Most people don't habitually, but now and then you find a rare soul who has fun no matter what. I was like that—yesterday, this morning. Now I'm not." She rose. "Well, good-by, good luck, it was wonderful. I'd like you to kiss me, briefly."

He did so. She pulled away, smiled. "I'll try to sneak Kay out to see you. What are you going to do about her?"

"Whatever she likes. Are you going to do anything about Larry?"

"I'm going to stay around awhile, to see if I can make something of him. If I can't, I'll wander off somewhere. As long as I'm young and beautiful, I can pick and choose. I'll try to beat the deadline."

Webb listened to her heels go down the stairs, out the door, and out of his heart. A strange sadness came over him. It seemed unfair that a person could change like that. That the wild and vibrant beauty should become placid made the world a duller, cheaper place. A place of business and existence, not adventure and living.

Clods, he thought. Normally, we're just that. Up until a few weeks ago, nothing had ever happened to me, nothing to fret about. I've thought these weeks were tough, but there's been an exhilaration I've never known before. Millicent put a top on it, and now that things are close to being straightened, now what?

He picked up the brief case, decided to meet the five-o'clock train, and telephoned Larry. On the way to the station, he set Larry's mind at rest on Millicent, and even the exhaust seemed to purr with a new happiness. Larry whooped once and pushed his foot to the floor board. The roadster leaped ahead, and a swift chain of events were set in motion.

An old model coupé had been in the act of passing, and when the roadster speeded, the two cars hung abreast on the two-lane street long enough for an oncoming truck to meet the coupé head-on.

Larry pulled off the road, slid to a stop, and he and Webb ran back to the wreck. The driver of the coupé hung brokenly over the remains of the steering wheel, and Webb eased him back against the cushions. He recognized the man as Flannel Shirt, evidently on his way to work.

The truck, which was still operable, was pulled off the road by the dazed driver, and a few cars began to gather.

Flannel Shirt opened his eyes, seemed to recognize Webb. He sneered, cursed under his bubbling breath. Then his eyes shifted over Webb's shoulder, widened with stark terror, and he died.

Webb turned to see Louie at his side, looking stupidly at the dead man. "Got to come sometime," he said, and walked away.

Webb thought it strange that Louie never seemed to cut any grass with his sickle. This thought was pushed out of his mind by the arrival of the ambulance, which somebody had called, and the routine of reports to a State traffic officer.

After the formalities were over, he and Larry continued the remaining two blocks to the station at a sober rate.

"I feel kind of responsible for that, Webb."

"He didn't honk his horn," Webb pointed out.

"Yeah, but if I hadn't acted like a kid, he'd have got around me all right. I didn't know he was there till the crash."

"I never saw a man die before," Webb said. "I hope I don't again. It's . . . I don't know. Something turned over inside me. It's still turning. Let's don't talk about it any more. Only watch it after this, will you? Death isn't pretty."

"Yeah."

They hadn't long to wait for the limited to come out of the hills with a faint slanting plume of smoke, a clanging bell, and brakes commanding silence. It paused briefly, one passenger alighted, and the limited was on her way.

The passenger was a tall, lean man with a face like a dark bird of prey, and an appearance of immaculate poise. He glanced around negligently, took in the roadster with a keen dark glance, and walked briskly toward Horace Beecham's cab.

Webb stepped out. "Are you Mr. Karp?"

The man halted, looked Webb over carefully. "Yes. You're Curtain?"

"That's right. Sorry I failed to meet you today."

Karp shook hands, a hard, swift clasp. "Quite all right. Do you have the brief case?"

Webb hesitated. Some of the feeling Millicent had tried to instill now came through from this man. A sense of ruthlessness. A sense of brilliant deadliness.

"I . . . suppose we talk about it here on the platform."

Karp lifted an eyebrow and followed Webb to the deserted end of the station platform, out of earshot.

"What's in the brief case?" Webb asked.

Karp smiled. "That is hardly the point. It is for sale, I understand. I am ready to purchase it."

"But I feel a little uneasy about it. What are you going to do with it?"

"What are you going to do with the money?" Karp countered.

"Nothing that will hurt anybody else. Can you say the same?"

"Oh, yes," Karp answered smoothly, "I can say the same, happily."

"We're just beating around the bush," Webb exclaimed. "Here it is, flat. I won't sell it till I know what I'm selling. Take it or leave it."

Karp paced a couple of steps to and fro, stopped and looked slightly down at Webb with eyes that now had a faint surface glaze.

"I feel competent to advise you, young man, because it is obvious that you have had few contacts with the world of business. It is equally obvious that I have had many. My advice is, give me the brief case."

"Sure," Webb scoffed, "you're the big-shot financier, you're the man of the world, and I'm the country bumpkin. But I'm the one that's got the gadget. I name the terms."

Karp pursed his thin lips, looked down his dark beak. "I was not patronizing you," he said in reasonable tones. "I never underestimate. Yes, you are a country bumpkin, but you are a man of intelligence. I flatter myself that I am, also. Two gentlemen of intelligence should be able to arrive at an amicable solution, or compromise."

"What's in the brief case?"

"Don't be quite so single-minded for a moment, my friend. Let me point out to you some of the advantages of riches, as rich you shall be with the amount I will pay. Have you been to Rio?"

Webb mixed a grin and a sneer. "But I was in St. Louis for a week end once."

"Ah, you like your home town. I don't blame you. It has a rustic beauty, and—"

"Yeah, it's no end quaint. We're wasting time. What's in the brief case?"

"You're right," Karp said, and dropped his veneer. "We are wasting time. I shall employ my own means. Good day. Is there a decent hotel in town?"

"Ask the cab driver. He gets a cut for such information."

Webb got into the roadster, and said, "Let's go somewhere for a drink, then get some food."

"I don't want to eat, Webb. I keep seeing that man die."

"Yeah," Webb mused soberly. "I came down here all set to make a lot of money, and I thought of him. I knocked him down once, and I'm sorry. He was doing what he thought was right. But anyway, when I thought of him, I suddenly wanted to know some answers. I wonder if whatever is in that brief case is going to kill people."

"Why don't we just open it?"

"Well, if I decide to sell it anyway, I've got a hunch I couldn't get anything for it if it was tampered with. I may decide to sell. Let's go out to Al's."

They had a couple of shots of Al's private stuff, chewed some cloves, and drove to Kay's.

"You go in after 'em," Webb ordered. "I'll stay out of sight."

Larry returned presently with Millicent.

"Sorry," Millicent said. "No can do. Pop put up the bars until after tomorrow. What is this meeting scheduled? Are you on trial?"

"I'd forgotten it. I've got to make a speech.

On trial? Seems so, with Kay's father. How does she feel about it?"

"She's gnawing at the bars."

"That's the damnedest thing. I won't be any different after the meeting."

"In the public eye you may. There's something to be said for her parents' attitude. Public opinion is important."

Webb looked at her open-mouthed. "Is that you?"

XIII.

Kay was in the audience, and Millicent. Kay caught Webb's eye, winked, pointed a finger at her own head and moved it in short circles. Webb grinned.

Millicent looked at him with a quizzical little smile. The new Millicent, who had changed after receiving her legacy unexpectedly early. Webb's grin died.

Webb estimated the audience at one thousand. Businessmen and their wives, employees of stores, shops, and the shirt factory, which had declared a half holiday. They sat forward in their seats in a light perspiration of expectancy and turned their eyes on Webb.

Webb returned their stares, not calmly but with a trace of defiance, for he felt that twisted logic had placed him here on the platform. In the low rumble of their conversation he read an uneasiness, a confused anger that had only to focus to become dangerous.

He flipped a glance toward the stage wings. Out there Larry waited. "You never can tell what might happen," Webb had told him. "Be ready to take me away in a hurry." He shifted the brief case beside his chair so that he could grab it on the fly. He had brought it, because he had no idea of the means Karp might employ to acquire it, and he felt that it was as safe in his possession as anywhere.

The audience murmur hushed as big Andy Ames strode onto the platform and laid a brown hand on the speaker's pedestal. Andy's commanding personality was strengthened by two six-guns which were not completely hidden by his black coat, and when he raised a palm for silence he got it.

"This is gonna be orderly," Andy said quietly. "I got deputies here and there in the audience, with the mind and means to enforce order. Anybody that wants to start a ruckus can leave now. We'll wait till they get out, and no questions asked."

He paused. Heads craned in the audience. A ripple of giggles fluttered through the section where the shirt-factory girls were concentrated. Nobody left the hall, and Andy stopped the beginning murmur again with his palm.

"I don't rightly know," Andy continued, "just what we're tryin' to find out. Near as I can figure from talkin' to people, it's not so much if Webb Curtain is crazy but if he's a dangerous element in the town. Nobody's brought any legal charges against him, and so far as I know he ain't done anything criminal. Yet one mob made an open attempt on his life, and a bunch of hoodlums nearly killed him the other night. On top of that, a little boy was killed because a mob wanted blood, and some of the men in this town blacked eyes and tore clothes in the street last Sunday noon. That's got to stop!"

This statement had a rafter-shaking strength, and the huge constable paused before continuing in a quieter vein.

"I think you're here with an honest hope that we'll be able to settle the difference that has split the town wide open. You know what that can do to a community. It's funny, but even a little thing that ain't important can start an argument that can grow into a war. Seems to me that's what happened here. Didn't make much difference to anybody if Webb Curtain was a little cracked. Most anybody would be, after what happened in his family. But the argument started, and pretty soon the feelin's of the town was fixed on what came out of the argument, and not the original question.

"Now I don't know exactly what we should do. Pat Cain has got some ideas on the subject, and I think we oughta listen to him. I know a bunch of you is sore at him on account of his editorial, but I think he wrote it in an honest effort to clean up a mess, to make you think. Come on up, Pat, and tell us what you think."

As the massive editor came from a seat in the front row, Andy repeated his first admonition. "Remember, you people, this is gonna be orderly."

Pat Cain took Andy's place at the pedestal, and smiled at the crowd.

"I'd like to make you understand, if I can, that all of us have been caught up in a whirlwind of emotion that seems to have no logical explanation," he said earnestly. "Our present situation, to my mind, follows the pattern of war making. A mild difference of opinion, say, grows up between two factions, nations, idealogies—what not. The acts growing out of that difference assume an importance which soon overshadows the basic argument and it is lost from sight in gun smoke. While we haven't progressed that far, the seeds have been planted. Our problem is to kill the growth.

"However, I don't feel that merely by stating the problem, and pointing out its forgotten and unimportant foundation that we can eliminate the feeling that exists. We must set our minds at rest on Webb Curtain. We must decide on our attitude and our future treatment. Personally, I believe that he has never been anything but

normal. But he has a few words to say, and you can decide for yourselves. Here he is."

No applause. Webb noted that. He had been introduced from stages before, and invariably nodded to the automatic spatter of hands. He walked up to the pedestal, brief case in hand, with a sardonic smile tilting his mouth.

From the corner of his eye, he also noted a motion in the wings to his left. H. William Karp was there, beckoning to Andy Ames, and Webb heard Andy's steps move in his direction. He faced the audience, pushed Karp out of his mind for the time being.

"I feel this way," he began. "Something happened to me right after mother and dad . . . well, after. It seemed to me that I had no choice in what I did. Events took place before I did anything about them, events that made me act. And by the time I had taken care of the first, another had already come about which pushed me on to some other act.

"Now in almost every case, somebody put the wrong interpretation on what I did. Whatever it was, it was taken as evidence that I was cuckoo.

"Maybe I was. I'm not now.

"The shock of my parents' death threw me into a spin. Things happened so fast for a while that I couldn't quite keep track. While I was thinking of the last crisis, I was invariably facing a new one.

"On the night I ran into— No, I don't mean that. On the night I met Bessie, I was really in a spin. I had been ordered to leave town. I started away, because I had a job waiting for me in New York. But I got delayed by this and that, and found that the man I was to work for had died of a heart attack.

"Well, Pat Cain gave me a job, but I was ordered out again by Tom Eagan and a few of his crowd. Now look, I'm human. To have people you've known all your life tell you you're not wanted is bad enough. But to have that come on top of a shock such as I had is a trifle unsettling.

"Maybe I did attack Bessie. I don't think so, but maybe I did. She said later that she wasn't positive. She told Andy that. She wouldn't press charges. But let's say I did. Just for the sake of argument.

"As I get it, she wasn't hurt, really. Still, if I did slap Bessie around, I'm sorry. I apologize to her, and to you, and anybody else that wants an apology. It won't happen again, because I'm all right now. I'm back to normal."

Even as he said this, Webb wondered if it was completely true, and caught his breath as the statement seemed to hurl someone in the audience to her feet with a cry.

"No!" she shouted. "No!"

It was Bessie Hillman, standing tensely near the back row, hands at her throat.

"Tommy Eagan done it," she cried. "When I was finishin' up the late dishes. Come into the kitchen and started makin' passes. I left the dishes in the sink and run. He yelled after me I'd lose my job if I said anything. So I put it on Webb, 'cause I had to explain the bruises I knew I got. I bruise easy."

There was a sheepish silence.

Webb felt that each man in the audience who had taken part in any action which had centered around him was now thinking what a fool he and his fellows had been.

Then a mutter began to grow.

"Where is he?" somebody cried.

"Tom Eagan! Stand up!"

Andy banged on the pedestal with his fist.

"Quiet!" he roared, and the mutter subsided. "Tom ain't here, I guess," Andy observed, sweeping the hall with a glance, "and if he was, nobody's gonna do anything. You got any more to say, Bessie?"

"No," she replied, "'cept I don't want the job any longer. They got money, but I got my pride!"

Bessie sat down to crackling applause, and a plump man stood and raised his hand. Kay's father. His round face was agleam.

"I wish to make the first apology, Webb. I'm sorry. I think all of us," he said, taking in the crowd, "should stand as a gesture of apology."

The crowd surged to its feet, and loosed a cheer as from one great throat. Andy waited until it began to die, and waved them back into their seats. Webb sat down again. The face of the audience held relief now, relief that matched the lightness in Webb's chest.

"I guess that's that," Andy said. "We ain't concerned with Tom Eagan here. I don't want you to leave, though. While we're all together, there's a man wants to say a few words about somethin' he's gonna do for the town. Some of you have heard of H. William Karp. Here he is, anyway."

Karp moved to the center of the stage like, Webb thought, a dark bird of prey in circling flight—lazily, gracefully, yet with poise, ready to strike. He was greeted with good-humored applause. The crowd was relaxed. It gave him wide-eyed expectancy; here was a man who was going to do something for the town. Benefits were in the offing, and the people were ready to listen.

"I am happy to see," Karp said, "that you are the type of citizens who have made this country great. You are reasonable, you are forgiving. I don't know why this meeting was held, but the difference in your feeling now and that which you had a few minutes ago is refreshing. I should like to express the happiness I feel in

your reaction here. I wish to give this little city a real boost."

The crowd liked his easy familiarity.

"I am willing to set up a fund," Karp continued, "to be used as you see fit—for a slight favor."

A few skeptical smiles rippled the face of the crowd. There is always a catch, the smiles said.

"This young man," Karp said, and waved a hand at Webb, "has a brief case to which he may or may not have any right. I assumed in my first efforts to purchase it that he had the right to sell, and I was willing to pay up to a million dollars in cash for it."

This statement brought no reaction from the audience, in these days when terms like millions and billions have no concrete meaning. As if sensing this, Karp elaborated.

"Whatever amount we should have agreed upon, it was to be large enough to keep him in luxury all of his life—limousines, servants, world trips."

The crowd leaned forward; they knew of such luxuries.

"At the final moment of purchase, he refused to sell at any price," Karp said.

Eyes shifted to Webb, eyes that seemed to picture yachts, eyes that tried to fathom reasons for Webb's refusal. Webb looked at Karp, and felt again the revulsion which Millicent had tried to tell. Without specific reasoning, he knew that he would not turn the brief case over to Karp while still ignorant of its contents. A hunch only, but a compulsion that was overwhelming.

"As I said," Karp went on, "he may or may not have any right to the brief case and its contents. I will tell you now that those contents are of no value to anybody but myself. You know how a man will spend years and a great deal of money to find an art object, a painting, an antique? That is my position. I have been tracing this brief case for some time. Frankly, I want it. I am willing to pay for it. And I believe that it is yours, and not this young man's, to sell."

The crowd caught a bewildered breath. There was no excitement in it—yet. They didn't understand—yet.

"I find that its original owner— No, that's not correct. I find that the man who owned it before it came into Webb Curtain's hands, died owing a hospital bill to the city. Court Masters had no money. He had only this brief case, the contents of which are worth a fortune—to me, and to me only. It is my contention, therefore, that regardless of what arrangements he had made with Curtain, that his effects became the property of this city when he died a debtor."

Webb got to his feet. "That's not true, and don't let this guy talk you into anything!"

"Wait, Webb," Andy said. "You'll get a chance."

Karp nodded his thanks to Andy, and faced the audience again. "I shall gladly pay the city what I should have paid Curtain. The money could be used to build an additional wing on the hospital, providing work for several hundred men, or to build a playground, or both, or for any other project you desire. No doubt the young man wants to defend his position in this matter. But please remember one fact. Court Masters owes this city money, and he is dead. The only possibility of collecting it is to confiscate the brief case, for the wrecked car he left will not bring enough as junk to pay."

Karp stepped courteously aside for Webb. There was no applause; they were interested in what Webb had to say. They were not polite any longer.

"Listen," Webb said. "I've got more right to this gadget than anybody else, because I was Masters' partner. I've got nothing to show for it; you'll have to take my word. And I'm not going to turn it over to this man until I know what's inside."

"Why not?" a voice yelled.

Webb hesitated. What answer could he give? Hunch? An unreasonable attitude on his part would probably shift sentiment again; make him actually a lunatic in their eyes. Anybody that turned down a fortune without strong reasons was crazy; this was axiomatic. Yet what reason could he give?

"I don't know," he said, "except that this guy gives me a queer feeling. There's something wrong about him. He gives me the willies."

"He looks all right to me," a voice cried from the audience.

The crowd took it up. "He's O. K." "You *are* crazy!"

"He's *not* all right!" Webb shouted. "He's all wrong. And he's got no right to this, whatever it is."

"Open it up!" somebody shouted. "Let's see what's in her."

This notion caught instant approval, and shouts, cheers, and applause beat against the walls. Andy stepped forward and restored quiet.

"That seems like a sensible notion," he said.

"One moment," Karp interrupted. "The contents are my secret, and if they become public are no longer of any value to me. I can't dispute your right to open the case, but I can and will refuse to give you a nickel, then."

"You see?" Webb cried. "There's something phony about it. Why is it so damned important?"

"I can give you a general answer," Karp said to the crowd. "I remember the story of an old candy maker. He had a formula for a certain type of confection, and that formula was inside his

head. He made his own mixture in guarded private, and when he died the formula went with him. It would have been valueless if the secret had become known to anyone. That is the situation here."

"Just a minute, everybody," Andy Ames interjected. "All this jabberin'. Seems to me the only question is, who belongs to it, Webb or the town? If it's the town, can we make a deal? All five of the city councilmen are here, and I guess they could hold a meetin' in the office. Where's a lawyer? Oh, Judge Hammond. You got any ideas on who owns this thing?"

There was a touch of majesty in the man whose white crown of hair rose from the center section. He was sharply erect, for all of his sixty years, and the deliberate motion with which he buttoned the top of his black coat bespoke one who was accustomed to being heard at his leisure.

He spoke slowly, each word separate and distinct. "It is said to be a rule of common law that without the word 'heirs' a fee simple cannot pass by deed, and that this rule is so absolute and unyielding, that no matter how clearly the intention of the grantor to convey a fee may be stated in the deed, such intention can be of no avail without that word. Cole v. Lake County, 54 N. H. 242."

"Will you break that down a little, judge?" Andy asked.

"I refer to the rule of common law that when a man dies his property passes to his heirs, when so specified in a will. If such a document is in existence, and Mr. Curtain is named specifically as an heir to the object under dispute, he has a prior right."

"You got one, Webb?"

"No," Webb said. "Our agreement was verbal."

"What about that, judge?"

"It is well settled," Judge Hammond said, "both under our and the English statutes, that when a man dies intestate, his personal property does not, like his real estate, descend to his next of kin or heir-at-law. It remains in abeyance until administration is granted upon his estate. No title vests in his heirs until his estate has been administered upon, and then they take the surplus remaining after payment of the debts of the intestate, and expenses of administration, each in his proportion, under the statute of distribution. Douglass, Cullen v. O'Hara, 4 Michigan 132."

"Me," Andy said, as Judge Hammond reseated himself and unbuttoned his black coat, "I believe in short cuts. It looks like you got no title, Webb, but you got possession. Now it would take legal action to get it away from you, but we could get it. I aim to save the expense of a trial and take it. Give it here, Webb. We'll decide whether to sell it to Mr. Karp or not."

"Good heavens!" Webb burst out. "Isn't there any justice? I swear that Court Masters named me as a partner in this deal. You can't just take it away from me!"

"I have another point of information," Karp said, and the crowd turned its eyes to him.

Webb began to edge toward the wings. He moved a short step at a time.

"Court Masters himself had no right to the brief case," Karp said. "He stole it from the—shall we say, inventor of its contents. I have suddenly remembered meeting a young lady who lived next door to the inventor, and from her rather garbled description of what the inventor showed her one night, I gathered the true nature of the invention. But when I arrived to negotiate with him for its purchase, I found him long gone. However, I was able to trace through an investigating agency the identity of the man who came in and took the plans of the invention. Therefore, I feel that I have a double right to buy the brief case and put a million dollars in your city treasury, for I was ready to buy it from Murray George, the inventor himself."

Webb broke into a run. The name, Murray George, and its association with the story Millicent had told, was the final factor in his determination that Karp should not have the brief case.

At his first move, shouts went up.

"Stop him!" "Grab the loony!" "Don't let him get away!"

"Larry!" Webb shouted, plunging toward the wings, "let's go!"

The building janitor, a red-headed man with a blond mustache, materialized in Webb's path and blocked his escape. The janitor stood on wide-spraddled feet and thrust a hand in Webb's face, a straight-arming motion that sent Webb sprawling.

He rolled and twisted to his feet, swung the brief case like a club, and the janitor gave way. The delay, however, brought pursuit in reaching distance. Hands tore at his coat, and he slipped out of it. Other hands grabbed at him in the semidarkness of the wings, and he was clouted a dozen times before he broke free and into the alley.

Larry's motor was racing. Webb leaped on the running board and the roadster screamed into motion. Webb clung with frantic fingers for a few feet, then slipped inside.

They were around the corner, into the street, and away before pursuit had organized.

"What took you so long?" Larry yelled. "I was ready for half a minute."

"Never mind! I was held up."

"Where to, Webb?"

Webb considered. He had no plan. He was mentally chaotic. "Just go," he said, "but go like hell for a while. I'll think about what to do."

They were on the State highway, and as they swung in a fast turn out of the city, Webb looked back. A car had come into the street they were leaving. Whether or not it held pursuers he couldn't tell.

The speedometer needle climbed steadily, seventy-five, eighty, eighty-eight, ninety-two. They crossed the Turkey Creek bridge and were in a section of small farms sloping up from the highway to the right. On the left, pasture land was some fifteen feet below the built-up surface of the highway.

Webb set his eyes on the road which moved toward them at smooth, curving speed, and wondered what next. What could he do? He felt that he had destroyed all possibility of being accepted again by the townspeople. Hereafter he would be remembered as the guy who turned down a million dollars.

He saw a solution. If Larry could get him safely away, he would open the brief case, with a can opener if necessary. If its contents were worth a fortune to Karp, surely he could find a use for them.

"Take the county-seat fork," he directed, and Larry nodded.

The nod froze, and Larry was suddenly standing on his brakes. Webb jerked his eyes ahead, chilled with horror as a little girl ran out of a farmyard onto the highway after a lamb which frolicked ahead of her.

Larry's tires screamed, and the roadster swerved out of control toward the abrupt drop on their left.

"Jump!" Larry cried.

Their speed had decreased considerably, but remaining momentum tumbled Webb some thirty feet along the concrete, onto the sandy shoulder, and left him on the brink of the low bluff as the roadster crashed in a field of clover and burst into flame.

He paid no attention to his bleeding hands, his raw shoulders, his skinned face. He got to his feet, poised for the leap, but froze when Larry yelled.

"What you doing, Webb?"

Webb almost fainted with relief as Larry scrambled up to the roadway.

"I thought you were still in the car."

"Me?" Larry said. "Not me. Damn that fool kid."

"What happened?" asked a childish voice.

She had the lamb in her arms now, a lamb frightened by the commotion, and struggling for liberty. A reminiscent shock hit Webb when he saw that the lamb's wool, instead of being white as the little girl's curls, was blue as her eyes.

Somewhere before, at some unremembered time, he had seen a blue lamb.

"Hello," Webb said. "Run back in the yard. You might get hurt here. That's a funny-looking lamb."

"I put too much bluing in its baff water," she said. "Ain't you going to put out the fire?"

"Run along," Webb said curtly. To Larry: "Sorry."

Larry eyed the car. "The gas tank. Beat it! It'll explode!"

He plunged into motion, and Webb followed for a step or two. Sight of the brief case at the edge of the road stopped him. With one swift motion he caught it up, whirled, and flung it into the flames of Larry's roadster. He turned again and ran into the farmyard as the gas tank exploded.

The momentary hush was almost tangible. Then chickens squawked behind the house, a woman's voice exclaimed, a dog barked. But during the instant of silence, he had heard the faint approaching roar of an automobile traveling at high speed.

Crowded with men, it rounded the nearest curve and began to slow.

Webb looked at white tongues of flame licking above the highway lip. The brief case was now destroyed beyond salvage.

"Why did I do that?" he asked aloud.

XIV.

"But why, Webb?" Kay wailed. "They've got a right to know. Tell 'em."

Webb gave the group in the farmyard a baffled stare. They were sullen: Andy Ames, Michaelson, Joe Rafferty, Pat Cain. They wanted to know why, too.

"I don't know!" Webb burst out. "Didn't you ever do something, and then wonder why, afterward?"

"I don't know of anything we can do about it," Andy Ames said, "except not like it. The hospital can sue you for Masters' bill, I guess, and if he's got any heirs, they might cause you some trouble. One thing, you sure wrecked everything you'd done to get back in good favor."

Andy turned away, and the others. Pat Cain shook his head sadly as he followed them into Andy's car. Webb, Larry, and Kay were alone in the yard. The farmer, his wife, the little girl, and the lamb eyed the trio with stiff curiosity from the porch.

"Can we hitch a ride?" Webb asked Kay.

"Come on."

They drove back in silence, dropped Larry at home, and Kay and Webb faced each other.

"This time I'm really leaving," he said.

"I'm going with you, Webb."

"Thank you, Kay. You don't have to, and if you're afraid of me, I'd rather you didn't."

"The only thing that worried me was whether

you chased that girl through the streets. I could understand you running after Millicent, maybe, but Bessie. She isn't even pretty."

Webb tried a grin, and thought it came out pretty well, considering. "Take me home, will you? I'll grab my bag. When can you leave?"

"Soon as I'm packed. Where we going?"

"I don't know."

When she stopped before the Parker residence, Webb blinked at the house. Its windows were blank, like the eyes of the two blind sisters. It had an unlived-in look. His bag sat on the porch, and he ran inside the yard, Kay's heels tapping after.

The house was empty. As they had come unannounced, the Parker sisters had departed. The rooms were empty, the walls now bare of their tapestries.

"What the hell?" Webb murmured.

"Seems they'd have said good-by, anyway, doesn't it?"

"It's dopey. Well, maybe they'll write. How did they get away so quick? When I left here, the house was full of furniture. It's only been a few hours."

He led the way out, puzzled. As he picked up his bag, he saw the folded heavy cloth strapped to its side.

"Hello," he said. "What's this?"

He unfolded the tapestry they had hung in his room for a time, and a chill scurried down his spine as the objects woven into its design bit into his memory.

"Why!" Kay gasped. "There's Millicent, and that man Karp!"

"I wouldn't say definitely," Webb demurred. "There's a resemblance, all right. But what got me is the blue lamb. And— This is weird."

He checked off the items. The red-headed man, the janitor who had straight-armed him. The streamlined train. Well, it could be the train that had been wrecked. The moon.

Moon? Yes, black and cream shadows, silver-plated hair on Al's veranda.

The gun. The shotgun with which Masters had bluffed the crowd?

The broom. Broom? He didn't remember a broom.

The woman with a naked knife. She had flung it at him with a curse when the mob was scattering from Masters' command.

The white-bearded bindle stiff of Turkey Creek. Pattern, he had said. Where was the pattern here? These objects had been connected with Webb's life, but they were only symbols of the circles in which he had been running for weeks. A pattern had form. This was only a mixture.

The hairbrush baffled him until he remembered Mr. Thomkins, the loquacious barber.

But the broom? Somebody slipped up there. Unless— He thought suddenly of Sophie, and the thin chill of memory touched the short hairs on his neck again. Sophie's function in the household had been that of a broom. She cleaned. And she had pushed him out of the way of the shotgun.

Maybe that was the pattern. Maybe each of these objects had saved his life. But no. The train wreck had almost got him killed, as had the blue lamb. No, these were just objects on a cloth.

"Had me spooked for a minute," he said to Kay.

"What does it mean?"

"Nothing. I thought it might for a minute, but everybody has seen things like these. Almost every man has had a blonde in his life, I imagine, and a moon, and all the others. That blue lamb had me going, but it's only coincidence."

He broke off, folded the tapestry, and smiled at Kay. "I feel swell, honey. We're going to have fun."

She returned his smile, touched his cheek with her fingertips. Then she shifted her eyes toward approaching footsteps.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," Webb said.

"Mr. Curtain," Potter said as he came up the walk, "I see you are leaving, and I wish to direct you to a job." He gave Webb the card of a Chicago department store. "If you will call there, they will put you to work."

"That's swell!" Kay exclaimed.

"But why?" Webb asked. "I shouldn't think you'd want anything to do with me after I messed up the deal with Karp."

"On the contrary," Potter replied. "I see by the glow in this young lady that you have reached a new beginning. I am interested always in new beginnings. Good-by."

Webb followed Potter with a puzzled glance, puzzled because of the unexpected offer, and because of a new sensation which cloaked him with lassitude, resignation, and a touch of despair. The verve he had felt a moment before was gone.

Kay broke into his thoughts. "That tapestry will look well on our apartment wall, Webb. Will we get married here, or there?"

"Anywhere," Webb said absently.

"What's the matter? You were happy just now."

Webb picked up his bag, and saw as he did so that the ring Miss Margaret had given him was gone. He felt a little sick, and wondered where he had lost it. Then he grinned at Kay, as cheerfully as possible.

"Nothing's the matter. Let's go."

THE END.

OCCUPATION: DEMIGOD

By Nelson S. Bond

Draft board registrars have a pretty monotonous job—ordinarily. Now and then they may turn up an unusual specimen, though, like—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

Well, the old gentleman in the star-spangled topper was getting ready to draw capsules out of a fish bowl, which made some seventeen million annoyed Yankees between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five eligible to spit in Herr Hitler's eye, so since I'd served two semesters in the Federal Writers' College, it won me a berth on the registration board. So I went, and it was just like I thought it would be.

First thing in the morning, the jernt was jammed to the rafters with "gotta-get-to-work" boys, but the crowd let up about eleven o'clock, and by two in the afternoon we were almost lonesome. I don't know how it was in your big towns; I'm just telling you how it was where I evade my taxes.

Anyhow, things were pretty dull until some sterling genius remembered that every true American cherishes the inherent right to lose *two* things: his life in battle, and his shirt at poker. After that, time whizzed by to the cheerful clack of chips, and whenever a late registrant straggled in, the holder of the high spade had to go snare his J. Hancock.

So, of course, everything happens to me. I had to be showing the ebony ace when this johnny marched in. I moaned and flipped over the matching one-spotter in the hole, and I got lots of sympathy—like hell! And naturally I wasn't the nation's Sweetest Dispositioned Registrar as I waved the new signer-upper to a seat and grabbed a form.

"Park it!" I said, and punched the inkwell with the spray gun our post-office department laughingly calls a pen. "O. K.," I said. "Your name, please?"

He was a big jasper. Big and broad and blond, with china-blue eyes so placid they almost soothed you. At first I figured him for one of those "strong-back, weak-mind" lads—bovinely stupid and complacent. Then I looked again, and wasn't so sure.

It wasn't that at all. The quietude of those pale, washed-blue orbs was not born of a low I. Q. rating; his ease was that of confidence, of self-assurance, of a sort of—of *knowingness.* For a strange, strained moment I felt tiny and unimportant as I sat there facing him; I felt somehow humble in his presence. Then I thought, "Hey, wait a minute! What makes here?" And I said again, "Your name, please?"

He carried one of those bulgy leather cases used by musicians and gangsters to conceal their lethal weapons. He set this on the desk between us, handling it carefully, gingerly. His voice was deep and rumbly and pleasant.

"Ayres!" he said. "T. Marshall Ayres."

"Don't be formal with Uncle Sam," I told him. "The front handle?"

"Theritas," he said sheepishly. "My friends call me Teddy."

Well, it takes all kinds to make a world. You'd be surprised how many Marmadukes and Algernons are living under aliases of Butch and Spike. I made him spell it for me, and it looked as silly as it sounded. Then I said, "Very well, Mr. Ayres. Now your address?"

He fidgeted, and for a moment there was uncertainty in his preternaturally calm eyes. "I . . . I don't exactly know how to answer that," he said slowly. "I . . . that is—"

"It's very simple," I told him. "Where do you hang your toothbrush? That's home, be it ever so humble. You *do* have a toothbrush?"

"Oh, yes. But what I mean is—I'm not living anywhere just now. I've just left one place, and I'm on my way to another—"

He seemed to want to explain, but I was thinking of those wired aces and cut him short.

"Skip it," I said. I wrote in "transient" and went on to the next question. "Give the name of someone who will always know where you are."

"Amaltheia," he answered promptly.

"Amaltheia *who?*"

"Just Amaltheia," he said.

"Your wife?"

"My fiancée. We're going to be married next week."

I said, "Oh, hell!" and wrote in "Amaltheia Ayres," because the United States government is funny about last names. And I said, "Her address?"

"Olympus," he said.

"Olympus *where?* What State?"

"Just Olympus," he said.

This was getting monotonous. And I was getting an itch to throw things. I said savagely, "Look, Ayres—it's *got* to be somewhere! Now, where is it?"

"We-e-ell," he said dubiously, "some think it's in Greece. Of course it isn't, really, but—"

"What's good enough for Rand & McNally," I snarled, "is good enough for me." I put it down that way, then shot him the rest of the quiz program. "Age—height—weight?" I filled in the proper blanks, finally reached the last one. "Occupation?" I asked. "Business or profession?"

He looked at me calmly. And—

"God," he said.

The pen leaped and spluttered in my hand. I shoved my chair a few inches clear of the desk for a quick getaway. "I . . . I beg your pardon?" I said.

But there was no trace of laughter on his lips, and his eyes were gravely courteous.

"Perhaps," he amended, "I should say *demi*god. I'm not quite sure yet. The matter hasn't been finally decided. That's why I have to go to—"

Well, he looked harmless enough, at any rate. So I picked up my pen again. I said soothingly, "Don't look now, pal, but isn't that profession a little out of the ordinary? Maybe we ought to write you down as something less unusual?" My eyes lighted on the leather case, and inspiration burned. "That's some kind of musical instrument, isn't it?"

He nodded. "A horn," he said. "The horn of—"

"Then suppose I put you down as a musician? Understand," I hastened, "I don't *doubt* you. But—"

"I guess that would be all right," he approved. "I *was* a musician, you know. Until I found—*that*.

The horn." I couldn't help thinking that, for a deity, he was curiously sheepish. There was a pathetic eagerness in his voice. His eyes shone with a sort of wistful puppy-dog desire for understanding. "That's what started all this. I'd like to tell you. That is—if you'd care to hear?"

I glanced across the room. The poker chips clacked merrily. Somebody said, "Up five!" and somebody else said, "I'm in." There was a hell of a lot of money in the pot. I was nuts to waste time on this tow-headed wacky. But there was something about him— Oh, I can't explain it! Anyway, I settled back.

"Sure," I said. "I'd love to. Go ahead," I said.

He leaned forward, fingering the leather case as he talked. His story was fantastic, of course, and no sane man would believe a word of it. But his tongue had not the ease and glibness of that of the congenital liar, and there was a pleading look of truth in his eyes.

"I was walking down a small side street," he began, "when first I saw it—"

He was walking down a small side street when first he saw it in a pawnshop window. It rested between a battered microscope and a slightly used set of uppers. Like everything else in the window, it was covered with a fine film of dust, but the moment he laid eyes on it, he knew it was just the thing he had been looking for.

He went in. The room was small and dark and musty, and though a tiny bell jangled somewhere in the back of the shop, no one appeared.

Teddy waited. Nothing happened.

He called, "Hey!" Still nothing happened.

The display counter, with its grilled arch and long, dirty-paned showcases, was deserted. He took out his watch, glanced at it—

And instantly a gnomelike creature, all belly and beard, popped out of nowhere to talon the timepiece from his grasp, squint at it suspiciously, and rasp, "Two dollas!"

Teddy said, "B-but—"

"*Tree* dollas!" said the pawnbroker with an air of finality. "Tek it or leave it!"

Teddy said, "Look, Uncle, I want to see that—"

"A customuh! Vy didn't you say so?" The pawnshop proprietor thrust back Teddy's watch. "Yessir! Vot vill it be? Name it, I got it. Rinks, rewolwas, fishinks taggles, box-fightink gloves for the liddle boy, *nu?* Diamints—fine all-wool suets and ovacodes—typeridas—all on gendle time payments—"

"—that horn in the window," persisted Teddy.

"Hawn?" The broker looked blank for a moment, then beamed. "Ach, yes, the hawn!" He waddled away, returned in a moment, vigorously puffing dust from the object of Teddy's interest. "Movvless, ain'd it? Genuwine antigg powda hawn, Rewolution period, maybe sooner. Only a collector of relics like yourself should know the true value, *nu?*" Hopefully he studied Teddy's impassive face, surrendered the oddly shaped convolute of keratin and carried on stanchly. "Vas a powda hawn, maybe a dringink cup, who knows? Is now a fine awnament for the home liberry 'or den—"

Teddy raised the horn to his lips, tongued it. As he had hoped, it was pierced. It quavered a single, unhappy bleat as he blew. The proprietor shifted verbal gears without missing a syllable.

"—and is *also* a hundink hawn of eggsellent tone and qualidy!"

"How much?" asked Teddy.

The uncle scratched his beard speculatively. "Ten dollars?" he hazarded.

"I'll give you two."

"Is a boggin'at eight. Sir?"

"Two fifty," said Teddy. He laid down the horn.

"Faw fifty, and I'm losing money."

"Good-by," said Teddy. He started for the door.

The gnome moaned faintly and waddled after him.

"Waiddaminute! You want the hawn or don't you? So I'm going broke. Whose worry is that? Tree and a half, you said? Take it?"

Teddy grinned.

"You're a chiseling old scoundrel. If it cost you a penny more than one buck, I'll eat it. But all right, I'll take it for three fifty." He laid down three one-dollar bills and a fifty-cent piece, picked up the horn. "You got a case for this thing?"

"Tree," counted the pawnbroker absently, "and fifty cends, righd! Vot? A case? No, sir."

"I wish it had a case," said Teddy petulantly. "I'm going to look silly carrying an old cow's horn up Broadway— Hey! What's that?"

"That" had toppled from a shelf above his head, had fallen at his feet. It was a leather case of the type used by musicians, bright and new and shiny. In the fall its hasps jarred open; Teddy stared at the velour-lined interior with amazement.

"It's the case for this horn! Look, it fits perfectly!"

The proprietor's jaw gaped for a moment. He stared at the dim shelves perplexedly, then snapped back to normal.

"For the case," he wheezed, "only one dolla. It's a boggin."

"Half a buck," snorted Teddy, "and it's a windfall! You didn't even know you *had* a case!" He flipped a coin at the little man, turned to the door again. In the gloom his foot missed the sill. He stumbled and barked his shin, and said, "Damn! I wish you'd get some lights in this dump!"

And he left. On the street outside, for some reason he never could afterward explain, he turned to look back upon the shop he had just quitted. And he witnessed a surprising thing. Despite the

fact that it was still daylight, the pawnbroker had taken him at his word.

The little shop was ablaze with lights!

"It was all lit up," said Ayres, "like a Christmas tree. Do you understand? That dirty little shop, with its miserly proprietor—"

I said, "But what's so unreasonable about that? He may have had work to do after you left. And if the shop was as dark as you say—"

Ayres shook his head.

"I didn't think you'd get it—yet. I didn't. It took me quite a while to realize the truth. Of course, the meaning was staring me right in the face. I should have understood right then. And afterward, when I was practicing—and when *she* came in—"

"She?" I said. "Practicing?"

"Here's how it was," he said. "I went home—"

He went to his lodginghouse. It was only six in the evening, which is a professional musician's noon. He didn't have to go to work until nine o'clock, which left him three full hours in which to eat, bathe, shave and dress before he reported to the Kangaroo Klubbe where currently, and probationally, the dance band of which he was a member, was appearing. "Rusty Roberts' Rollicking Rhythm Rogues," they called themselves.

He drew the cow's horn from its case and looked at it admiringly. Perhaps a little hopefully, as well. He was not any too sure he could push music through it, but he was game to try. Anything that has a mouthpiece, a tube and a bell can be made to elicit sounds if the blower knows how to lip it. If Bob Burns, thought Terry, could squeeze melodies out of a length of lead pipe and a funnel—if that gobble piper in Krupa's band could swing out on an old-time marine foghorn—surely he—

He lifted the thing to his lips—and blew.

Its bleat was piteous to hear. Low and mournful as the plaint of an agonized soul. And it didn't take the wind very well. Teddy got out his knife, cut a wider lip to the horn's end, tried it again. And again. After a while he succeeded in modifying the bleat into a series of ascending-descending notes. The range was short, but the sound was—well, unusual!

He smiled, satisfied. Rusty Roberts would approve of this. Rusty had been a little critical of his playing of late; had, in fact, made several caustic comments featuring the words, "corny" and "schmaltz." But wait till he let go with a hot lick on the old cow's horn. It would wow 'em!

He leaned back in his chair and patted his foot—*oompah! oompah!*—and jammed "China Boy" through the twist of horn. A perfect performance. He never hit the theme once, but succeeded in glissading perilously about its edges with minors and fifths that yearned toward barrelhouse chords. Heaven was in and about him, his heart was at ease, and his eyes were rapt. The bleating soared and quavered. And so did an irate voice.

"*Mister* Ayres!"

The screaming reproof finally broke through Teddy's mantle of deaf contentment. He came to with a start to find his landlady standing in the doorway, eyes stormy, her hands pressed hard against her ears.

"*Mister* Ayres—how many times must I ask you don't blow them awful things here in my house?"

Teddy said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. McClanahan. I hope it didn't disturb you."

"It ain't me I'm thinkin' of. It's the rest of the lodgers. Poor Mr. Drake, him which has to sit up all night, watchin' at the Apex Luggage factory, and not gettin' a wink of sleep with you makin' them ungodly sounds—"

"I'm sorry," said Teddy again. "I'm stopping now, though. I've got to get dressed."

The word woke an echo in Mrs. McClanahan's memory. Her errand came back to her. Her broad hands sought broader hips, and her elbows arched dangerously akimbo.

"Dressed," she snorted, "is right! And so, if you ask me, should *she!* The nerve o' that hussy—"

"Eh?"

"I'll ask you to remember, *Mister* Ayres, that this is a respectable lodginghouse! Things is come to a sorry state when young ladies—only *she* ain't no lady, as anyone can plainly see—comes boldly callin' on menfolks in . . . practically nothing!"

Her broad face reddened, whether with shame, fury, or indignation Teddy could not guess. He said, "But . . . but I don't understand, Mrs. McClanahan. A young lady? To see me? Where—"

"And where else should she be but downstairs? I'm not one to dictate right an' wrong to my roomers, Mr. Ayres, but it seems to me there are certain limits—"

Teddy pushed past her, out the door, and leaned over the stairwell. What he saw in the narrow hallway two flights down brought a gasp of surprise to his lips.

"Why . . . why she's wearing a *chiton!*"

"Sheet on," stormed the landlady furiously, "or off, I won't have her in my house! You'll be kind enough to make her leave immediately, Mr. Ayres! And"—darkly—"yourself with her if she so much as sets her nose inside my house again!"

"A *chiton,*" said Teddy impatiently, "is a costume, Mrs. McClanahan. The style of garment worn by ancient Greek women. As to whom this girl is, or what she wants here, I'm as much in the dark as you. But if you'll excuse me—"

He raced down the stairs. He was almost at the bottom when the girl turned and looked at him.

And then—

Well, those things happen. They happened then, all of them and suddenly, to Teddy Ayres. There was no *ping!* of a straightening bow cord, there was no *whiz!* of an arrow—but Teddy was a gone goose, instantly and completely.

His footsteps faltered, his hand on the balustrade trembled with an unwonted ague. His tongue felt like a wad of throbbing cotton, and his heart boomed and pounded like a set of tympani. He stared, speechless and shaken.

Hair the rich, ripe sheen of sunlight on soft gold, eyes the calm, sweet blue of high lake water, lips warm and red as—as—Teddy's descriptive powers failed him. She was a dream walking. A melody wakened to vibrant life. An—an eight-bar break on a tenderly haunting tune.

"Hello," she said. Her voice was like the laughter of mellow wood winds. "Hello. Are you Teddy Ayres?"

Teddy stared, entranced. No breeze wafted through the dim and fusty hallway, but she seemed to bear along with her a sweet and secret, personal and private, woodsy scent of her own. The flowing edges of her classic garment clung to the perfect lines of her figure; her hair was a cascade of molten bronze.

Then the cat relinquished his tongue. Partly. And he gulped, "Y-yeah, I'm him. B-but who—"

"I'm Amaltheia," she said. "Where did you find it?"

"It?" said Teddy.

"The horn, of course. We've been looking for it *so* long. Ages. Ever since that perfectly foul Italian barbarian got Donny whiffed on ambrosia and stole it from him.

"And then—" She smiled, and Teddy's heart did a nip-up. "And then, of course, you used it—and we knew at once someone had found it. So we came."

The carbon of emotion was still clogging the motor of Teddy's brain.

"H-horn?" he said.

"Yes. *My* horn! Oh, please don't be difficult. We know you have it, and—it's *very* important, you know. What with the way things have been going lately, we're likely to need it almost any day. Where is it?"

"The horn!" said Teddy suddenly. "Oh, you mean the *horn?* The old cow's horn? Why . . . why it's upstairs. But I don't see how you knew—"

Amaltheia's eyes glinted, and a swift pink suffused her alabaster cheeks. She stamped her foot.

"*Cow's* horn indeed! Why . . . why, you impossible mortal! Aren't you ashamed to talk that way about—"

"And a fine one," interrupted a strident tone, "*you* are to be talkin' about shame! Mr. Ayres, didn't I ask you to get this creature out of my house immediately?"

Teddy's patience snapped. He turned on his landlady angrily. "Oh, go hide your head under a rug!" he snapped. "This lady and I—"

He stopped, stricken. For Mrs. McClanahan was nowhere to be seen. And at his elbow, where she had stood but a moment before, now stood an incredible figure. A creature half man, half goat, bearded of lips, furry of thatch, thigh, and chest, grinning—and bearing in his hands the horn!

"O. K., sis!" said the amazing apparition. "I got it. Shall we go?"

All else was forgotten in Teddy's swift panic for his new-found instrument. He reached out angrily.

"Hey! Gimme that!"

Amaltheia said dubiously, "Achelous—I don't think we should take it without giving him some compensation. After all, he found it for us—"

"Aw, come on!" chuckled Achelous. "We'll send him a million *mina*, or whatever they use for money nowadays." He started for the door; Amaltheia moved after him uncertainly

But Teddy was not through yet. Anger welled up in him like a dark flood, his brow contracted and his usually placid eyes flamed. He leveled a warning finger at the disappearing satyr. "That horn comes back to me this minute," he roared, "or else—"

He never finished the threat. For at that instant occurred a breath-taking finale. The cow's horn seemed to give a little shrug in Achelous' hand, wriggled free—and flew across the hall to Teddy. It nestled there securely, even though Teddy's fingers were too nerveless with surprise to grip it.

Amaltheia cried, "Oh!" in a hurt little voice, and what the satyr said was archaic, but still very obvious. He stared at Teddy glumly.

"You bought that thing," he moaned, "with *silver!*"

Teddy nodded, dazed.

"Why . . . why, yes. A fifty-cent piece—"

Achelous growled and stomped his hoof bitterly.

"I might have known it! Now we can't get it unless you give it to us of your own free will! All right, mortal! How much?"

Too many things had happened to Teddy. A half-hour ago he would have been willing to turn over his little "find" at any reasonable profit. Even five minutes ago he would have gladly given it—and his right arm along with it—to the girl now standing wide-eyed and pleading before him. But he was dazed with incredulity, now, and bewildered and more than a little frightened. And a frightened Yankee is a stubborn Yankee. His mouth tightened like a steel vise.

"It's not for sale!" he said.

Achelous stroked his beard pettishly.

"I see. Know a good thing when you have it,

don't you? All right—two million *mina?*"

"It's not," said Teddy grimly, "for sale!"

Amaltheia moved forward softly, placed a warm hand on his elbow. "But it means so much to us, Teddy. You don't know, of course, but *we* do. They're rearming, you know. I think they're dreaming of the old days of Empire. They're not content to rest and dream, as we are. They want to rise and rule again. They want to take our last refuge from us—put it under their dominion. They've even gone so far as to ally themselves with those other horrid creatures—the hairy ones from the North—and very soon—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," broke in Teddy rudely, "and I don't care. I bought this horn to use in the band. And I'm going to use it. Now—"

A late shaft of evening sunlight, dying, entered a chink in the doorway and fell slantwise across Teddy's face. It was that which caused Amaltheia to gasp suddenly, clutch her brother's arm.

"Achelous—that jaw! He looks like—"

Achelous, too, had seen it. Astonishment shone in his eyes; he fingered his beard nervously. "Mortal—what is your name?" he demanded.

"She knows my name," said Teddy fretfully. "Ayres. Theritas Marshall Ayres—if you want to make anything of it. And now—"

"Theritas!"

"And now, I wish the two of you would run along and leave me alone!"

For the briefest instant there hovered in the air a dying whisper of Amaltheia's startled exclamation. "Ther—"

And then they were gone! And Teddy was shaking himself, wholly unable to assure himself as to whether this affair had been hallucination or verity.

He stared stupidly at the horn in his hand, then at the door. The door had not opened. How, then, had his visitors—if, indeed, he had had visitors!—left? Was it all some feverish dream? If so, it was a dream that, departing, had left behind one heart-stirring essence of charm. For in the musty hallway there lingered the delicate woodsy scent of the nymphlike creature he had seen and loved on sight.

Muffled sounds from the living room roused him from his mental maunderings. He stepped to the door, pulled it open. And a strange sight greeted his eyes.

Stern lifted to the ceiling like that of a sinking ship, hands pawing wildly at the scuffed floor boards, voice muffled by a thick and dusty layer of woven fabric, his landlady was kneeling on the living-room floor—*with her head hidden under the rug!*

Ayres paused dramatically, looked at me as though expecting some comment. I shook off the inexplicable sense of eerie that had engulfed me as he talked. I lit a cigarette. I said, "Ostrich, eh? Well, it's fashionable these days. Even governments do it."

"Don't you see," he said, "what that meant?"

"Hm-m-m," I told him. "It meant you weren't the only hinkey-pate in that lodginghouse. Did you take turns on the needle, or did you all have your own?"

The moment I cracked smart, I could have pulled my tongue out and stuffed it in my vest pocket. Because somehow my alleged humor didn't seem funny. I think it was his eyes that put the freeze on me. They were cold and stern, and at the same time judicial. I got a creepy feeling that if he should at that moment decide to give me the old eenymeeny, I'd all-of-a-sudden be out, and I *do* mean *woosh!*

Then the glaciers melted. Once again his eyes were wistful, friendly, anxious. He said slowly, "Don't you see? I told her to go hide her head under a rug. And she *did!*"

"I realize that," I said, "but I still don't get it. Who was this Amaltheia doll? And what and who was she talking about? And that hair-on-the-hoof she called her brother—what was he doing there? And how does the horn fit into the picture?"

"I was beginning to understand," said Teddy Ayres, "faintly. But I wasn't convinced. It was all too incredible. The clincher came later. That night, at the Kangaroo Klubbe."

That night at the Kangaroo Klubbe was like any one of a thousand other nights at any one of a thousand other small, hopeful, frayed-at-the-cuff night clubs in Manhattan. Dismal-looking waiters scurried fretfully back and forth between wan-looking tables and a drab kitchen, carrying lugubrious trays of victuals; an obese M. C. with a flatulent smile waved a wet fish at newcomers; bus boys dropped dishes; the hat-check girl gnawed gum viciously; the foods were cold and the drinks were hot and the ventilating system had already been closed tight, in anticipation of a lovely, suffocating evening.

It was early; the orchestra had not yet assumed its place on the dais incresting the four-foot circle known as a "dance floor," and a discouraged-looking piano player noodled casually through a retinue of old, and sometimes indistinguishable melodies.

In a back room Rusty Roberts eyed his trumpeter dubiously and said, "Novelty? What kind of a novelty, Ayres?"

Teddy smiled mysteriously.

"Look, Rusty, don't make me tell you. Just take my word for it, won't you? It's a whipper, I'll guarantee that. Just give me eight on the second chorus of "China Boy" and I'll show you—"

Rusty Roberts said, "I don't know, Buster. The

M. C. ain't been any too friendly lately. If you start sprinkling corn around here again tonight—"

"Corn!" said Teddy aggrievedly. *"Again!"*

"You heard me. Trouble with you, Ayres, you've got the idea you're gut-bucket. The truth of the matter is you're strictly springtime. Maybe you better forget this idea. If you've got anything hot, trot it out and let's have a listen. But I'm not giving you any blind licks without knowing—"

"O. K.!" said Teddy sulkily. "O. K.! Just skip it!"

He glared at the band leader, but Rusty didn't even notice. He had turned and was waving the boys from the room. "All right, gang, let's go. And give out tonight, hey?"

One by one they filed from the room. Teddy was the last to leave. He stood staring moodily at his horn, anger and disappointment mingled within him. "For two cents," he muttered to himself, "I wouldn't—"

But his pride was stronger than his petulance. He carried two cases into the club with him. His trumpet and his curly horn. The first he displayed prominently; the second he slipped under his chair until an auspicious moment should present itself.

Then the evening settled down to routine. Roberts' scale-rangers jumbled 'em up, old and new, sweet and hot, as is the custom of night-club bands. The dinner crowd dwindled off, and the after-dinner crowd ankled in. The air became staler and bluer and smokier, the fool colder and more expensive, the drinks warmer and weaker as the café habitues got tighter and tighter.

And, somehow, it was eleven o'clock, then twelve, and almost one. And still Teddy had not taken the horn from its case. And then, new numbers having been dragged through the mill till they were tattered, Rusty Roberts gave the uncork sign for old favorites. And tapped the stick for "China Boy."

It was then that his impatient dream wakened again in Teddy Ayres' mind. As he tongued the opening blaze chorus with the band, he was remembering, swiftly, the routine Rusty always followed on this number. He always turned the third chorus over to the percussions. The skins took up the dying beat, began to hammer around it. Then the doghouse came in; finally the piano, playing a bass fugue around the tempo.

It was a natural set-up for his little curly horn. Its melancholy wail would sparkle like a diamond against that throb setting. He bent over slyly, loosened the hasps of its case. He waited anxiously. And finally it came. The reeds dropped out. The brasses faded. The skins took up the time and started rumbling softly—

Teddy picked up his horn. He glanced once, and nervously, at Rusty Roberts. "I hope he doesn't notice," he whispered to himself. "I hope he doesn't notice till I get going—"

And, surprisingly, Rusty didn't. He stood there on the podium, beating the time; smiling mechanically, eyes fastened directly on Teddy—but he didn't seem to notice as Teddy lifted the curly old cow's horn to his lips.

Teddy swung out.

What happened then was baffling, for everything happened at once, and everything that happened was completely illogical, but no one in the night club seemed to think so except Teddy, and he was so intent on forcing music through his horn that he had little time to wonder.

For with the first wailing note of the horn, every bit of din and clatter in the club ceased, and all eyes came to the bandstand. Waiters paused with trays still poised above their heads, diners stopped eating, drinkers—incredibly!—neglected their drinks; even the manager of the club came from his office to listen, nodding with approbation.

The dancers stopped dancing, moved closer to the stand. And it was then that, even as he kept on playing in a sort of glow, Teddy saw something which made his pulses leap. Into the small cleared space stepped a familiar, and already dear figure—followed by a creature half man, half goat. And—

"Teddy!" called Amaltheia softly, "Teddy—play *our* song!"

It was impossible, of course. Impossible and fantastic. There was no reason for Teddy Ayres to know what she meant by "our" song—but curiously, he did! An instinct, deep, intuitive, guided his lips as he played the tune. And like the dim, incessant surge of white waters breaking on a golden, sandy beach, the drummer beat the time for him. All the other musicians had stopped playing; their mouths hung openly agape, their eyes were dull and pleased and vacant as the polite and empty eyes of figures painted on canvas.

And the song rose and wailed and filled the little room. And even as he played, Teddy found himself thinking that this setting was all wrong.

"It shouldn't be like this," he thought. "I should be in a shaded dell—warped, stunted trees, laden with rich, purple olives should surround me—green grass beneath my feet—and an azure sky—"

And it was so! Suddenly there was no longer a drab, ill-lighted night club. He played in the center of a shaded dell, encircled by slim trees laden with purple fruit. The fresh, green grass was spongy beneath his feet. And before him, light as a tossing leaf in an April breeze—Amaltheia was dancing!

Amaltheia, then Achelous. And their dance was that of the woodland nymphs and satyrs. She

laughing, taunting, chaste and fleetingly evasive —he the capering, grimacing would-be captor beating the turf with his cloven hoofs, breaking his half-beast heart in an ever-unattained pursuit.

That was the song, and the song had words, but the words were not those of an ancient race. They were English words, and where Teddy had heard them he could not at first remember. High school, perhaps—or college. Keats, maybe. "What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy—"

But the miracle of it was that no one save himself seemed to see the marvel of this moment. The drummer beat his hides, the slim, piercing-thin note of a pipe had crept in from the background, Teddy's music sobbed and cried, but his audience did not see how the walls of the night club had vanished, exposing a horizon and wildwood and sky, against which, like a huge and snow-capped backdrop, was outlined a lofty, cloud-garmented mountain peak.

And Amaltheia spoke to him again.

"The other song, Teddy! The song of Theritas!"

But he had anticipated her. Already his lips had found the new theme. No longer was the music soft, musing, pastoral; it was the skirling of pipes, now, the clash of steel on steel, the roaring of a thousand voices raised in just outrage. It was the tramp of men's feet, the valiant farewell of women to men in arms. There was glory and power and courage in this new but ancient song. A message and a warning. A defiance—

It was over! The music ended in a final, defiant note. The drummer sat stupidly before his instrument, his eyes dull, uncomprehending. The horn fell from Teddy Ayres' lips. He stared at it, shaken. Then at the girl, who had come to his side.

"But I don't—" he whispered, "I don't understand?"

Her hand was a gentle compulsion on his arm. "Achelous was right, Teddy. You *are* his son. You *are* one of us. Now do you understand?"

"*His son?*" repeated Teddy. "One of . . . of what?"

"His other name," said Achelous, "is Theritas. The Spartans called him that. Your father. I suppose you never saw him?"

Teddy shook his head.

"He . . . he disappeared before I was born. My mother waited, but he never came back. It was the war, you know."

Amaltheia nodded indignantly.

"Yes, that sounds like him. He *would* be there, of course. And he's been lolling around, ever since. Oh, I'll tell him what I think of him when we get back. But at east he gave you his name. That's more than he usually does, the scoundrel!"

"My name?"

"Ayres," said Achelous impatiently. "Or Theritas. He's your father, you know. And I suppose that makes *you* a god, too. Or a demigod, anyway. We'll have to ask Father Zeus about that. I wouldn't be surprised if he granted you full rights and privileges. You found the horn, you know, just when we needed it."

He took the horn from Teddy's unprotesting hand, lifted it. For the first time, Teddy noticed that Achelous had only one horn; that there was a broken stump on his left forehead. The satyr pressed the horn to the stump. It fitted reasonably well.

"Chipped," said Achelous pettishly, "and, of course, *you* had to bore a hole in the end of it. Oh, well!"

Teddy stared at him numbly.

"It's your horn?"

"Certainly it's his," said Amaltheia. "Or mine, to be accurate. Father Zeus gave it to me for helping him. He gave it the Power, you know, to grant any wish to its owner. That's why—"

"Amaltheia!" Light dawned suddenly upon Teddy as he remembered almost-forgotten legends. "Amaltheia's horn! The Horn of Plenty! Cornucopia!

"Then that's why I got the case. And the pawnshop lights came on. And the landlady hid, and Rusty didn't notice, and—" He stared about him wildly, groaning. "Look what I've done here! I

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wished this night club would turn into a wooded dell!"

Achelous said, "Oh, change it back and let's get going! Don't you know every minute is precious? I can hear the drums rolling now. First thing you know, that blasted Mars is going to be rolling his chariots over *our* hills—"

"It's war again, Teddy," said Amaltheia seriously. "The Roman gods. They're restless; they wouldn't sleep and dream, as we have. Now they've joined forces with those vile, hairy gods from the North. Woden, or whatever his name is. And Hermes says they're planning to attack us. The Horn is our rallying horn."

"Already it is late—too late. We'll probably have to leave Olympus for a while. Not that those stumble-witted Roman gods could ever drive us out, but the cold, dark gods they've called in from the North—

"We'll rally at Olympus now, and then . . . then perhaps the Old Ones of Egypt, slow as they are to waken, will answer to the Horn. We'll have to go there, I think, and rouse their aid—"

For a long moment, Teddy stared at her. Logic still told him that this was impossible—but the hour for logic was past. And instincts deeper and more certain than mere reason guided him now. He turned to Achelous.

"The Horn, Achelous!" There was a new imperiousness to his tone as he faced the weirdly quiet, weirdly motionless night club. "When we have gone," he said gravely, "let this place return to normal in all save one thing. That no man remember what took place here tonight; that I, Teddy Ayres, be completely forgotten by these people and by all mortals who ever knew me—"

"They went back to Olympus," said Teddy Ayres, "in the . . . the usual way. I couldn't accompany them because I've not been given full rights and privileges yet. I have to go as a mortal. So I'm on my way South to New Orleans. I can get a steamer, there, for Greece.

"But I thought I should register before I left. I am—or was—an American citizen, after all. And who knows? Perhaps we may yet—"

I shook myself. Dark evening had fallen, and the poker game was breaking up. I'd wasted a whole afternoon on this crazy, tow-headed lug and his fantastic lies. I said, "Well, guy, I'll say one thing for you. You're the most convincing crackpot I ever met. Are you sure there isn't a P. S. to that story? About how you personally created the Universe and started it spinning like a top?"

"Then you don't believe me?"

"Me?" I laughed shortly. "Oh, yes! I can swallow anything. I'm Old Man Gullible himself. Look, pal, why don't you go home and—"

"Wait a minute!" he said quietly. He snapped open his music case. Nestled against the velour was a small and curly horn. "Put your hand on it," he said. "Wish for something. Anything."

I grinned at him derisively.

"Anything for a laugh, eh, pal? O. K.—I wish I had the ten bucks you've cost me this afternoon. If I'd stayed in that poker game, I'd eat steak tonight. And I wish you'd get out of here—"

Well, I knew he was sensitive. But I didn't know he was that sensitive. I must have hurt his feelings pretty badly with that last crack, because he didn't even stop to say good-by. As a matter of fact, he was gone before I finished talking. Funny about that—I didn't see him go. And the music case, the horn, seemed to slip from beneath my fingers as if by magic—

Still, it wasn't logical, and I'm a logical man. I did my best to forget about Mr. Theritas Teddy Ayres as soon as possible. And in the hurly-burly of registering America's militant manpower, I would have succeeded pretty well except for two things.

First was what happened a week or so after Registration Day. You know what I mean. We woke one morning to find that crack troops of the Italian army had marched from Albania into Greece. Purely a defensive movement, of course. The Greeks, it seems, were plotting to annex Albania, raid Rome and use Il Duce as a pincushion.

Only the Roman legions advanced swiftly to the rear, and the Germans finally came down. They took Olympus finally—but not before those who wanted to had left for Egypt, nor before they'd learned a wholesome respect for the fighting power of the Greeks—

And the other thing?

Well—figure it out for yourself. It happened just about two minutes after Teddy Ayres and his magic cow's horn disappeared. Johnny Baldwin sauntered over to the desk. He said, "Thanks, friend!"

"Thanks," I asked him, "for what?"

"The chips," he said blithely. "I ran out of cash, and since it didn't look like you were coming back into the game, I used yours."

"Well, of all the—" I began.

"And I won," he continued hastily. "Twenty smackers. So here's your split. Ten bucks."

I stared dumbly at the crisp ten-dollar bill he laid in my hand. And I felt a tight little chill run up and down my backbone. It was coincidence, of course. But he had said, "Wish for something. Anything. The thing you want most—"

And I still think he was a wackypot. But—I wish I'd wished for a million!

THE END.

BRAT

By Theodore Sturgeon

○ For purposes of getting a legacy, the young couple needed a baby—right away. They couldn't beg, borrow or safely steal one—but they got The Brat. He looked nine month's old, and liked his beefsteaks rare and his cigars black, though—

"It's not exactly a short-order proposition," said Michaele, tossing her searchlight hair back on her shoulders. "We've got to have a baby eight days from now or we're out a sweet pile of cash."

"We'll get one somewhere. Couldn't we adopt one or something?" I said, plucking a stalk of grass from the bank of the brook and jamming it between my front teeth.

"Takes weeks. We could kidnap one, maybe."

"They got laws. Laws are for the protection of people."

"Why does it always have to be other people?" Mike was beginning to froth up. "Shorty, get your bulk up off the ground and think of something."

"Think better this way," I said. "We could borrow one."

"Look," said Mike. "When I get my hands on a kid, that child and I have to go through a short but rigorous period of training. It's liable to be rough. If *I* had a baby and someone wanted to borrow it for any such purpose, I'd be damned if I'd let it go."

"Oh, you wouldn't be too rough," I said. "You've got maternal instincts and stuff."

"Shorty, you don't seem to realize that babies are very delicate creatures and require the most skilled and careful handling. I don't know *anything* about them. I am an only child, and I went right from high school into business college and from there into an office. The only experi-

ence I ever had with a baby was once when I minded one for an afternoon. It cried all the time I was there."

"Should've changed its diapers."

"I did."

"Must've stuck it with a pin then."

"I did not! You seem to know an awful lot about children," she said hotly.

"Sure I do. I was one myself once."

"Heel!" She leaped on me and rolled me into the brook. I came up spluttering and swearing. She took me by the neck, pulled me half up on the bank and began thudding my head on the soft bank.

"Let go my apple," I gasped. "This is no choking matter."

"Now will you co-operate? Shorty, quit your kidding. This is serious. Your Aunt Amanda has left us thirty grand, providing we can prove to her sister Jonquil that we are the right kind of people. 'Those who can take care of a baby can take care of money,' she used to say. We've got to be under Jonquil's eye for thirty days and take care of a baby. No nursemaids, no laundresses, no nothing."

"Let's wait till we have one of our own."

"Don't be stupid! You know as well as I do that that money will set you up in a business of your own as well as paying off the mortgage on the shack. *And* decorating it. *And* getting us a new car."

"*And* a fur coat. *And* a star sapphire. Maybe I'll even get a new pair of socks."

"*Shorty!*" A full lip quivered, green eyes swam.

"Oh, darling, I didn't mean— Come here and be kissed."

She did. Then she went right on where she had left off. She's like that. She can puddle up at the drop of a cynicism, and when I apologize she sniffs once and the tears all go back into her eyes without being used. She holds them for when they'll be needed instead of wasting them. "But you know perfectly well that unless we get our hands on money—lots of it—and darn soon, we'll lose that little barn and the garage that we built just to *put* a new car in. Wouldn't that be silly?"

"No. No garage, no need for a car. Save lots of money!"

"Shorty—please!"

"All right, all right. The fact that everything you say is correct doesn't help to get us a baby for thirty days. Damn money anyway! Money isn't everything!"

"Of course it isn't, darling," said Michaele sagely, "but it's what you buy everything with."

A sudden splash from the brook startled us. Mike screamed. "Shorty—grab him!"

I plunged into the water and hauled out a very tiny, very dirty—baby. It was dressed in a tattered romper, and it had an elfin face, big blue eyes and a golden topknot. It looked me over and sprayed me—*b-b-b-b-b-br-r-r*—with a combination of a mouthful of water and a Bronx cheer.

"Oh, the poor darling little angel!" said Mike. "Give him to me, Shorty! You're handling him like a bag of sugar!"

I stepped gingerly out of the brook and handed him over. Michaele cradled the filthy mite in her arms, completely oblivious to the child's effect on her white linen blouse. The same white linen blouse, I reflected bitterly, that I had been kicked out of the house for, when I pitched some cigar ashes on it. It made me feel funny, watching Mike handle that kid. I'd never pictured her that way.

The baby regarded Mike gravely as she discoursed to it about a poor drownded woofum-wuffums, and did the bad man treat it badly, then. The baby belched eloquently.

"He belches in English," I remarked.

"Did it have the windy ripples?" cooed Mike. "Give us a kiss, honey lamb."

The baby immediately flung its little arms around her neck and planted a whopper on her mouth.

"Wow!" said Mike when she got her breath. "Shorty, could you take lessons!"

"Lessons my eye," I said jealously. "Mike, that's no baby. That's some old guy in his second childhood."

"The idea." She crooned to the baby for a moment, and then said suddenly. "Shorty—what were we talking about before heaven opened up and dropped this little bundle of—" Here the baby tried to squirm out of her arms and she paused to get a better grip.

"Bundle of what?" I asked, deadpan.

"Bundle of joy."

"Oh! Bundle of joy. What were we talking about? Ba— Hey! Babies!"

"That's right. And a will. And thirty grand."

I looked at the child with new eyes. "Who do you think belongs to the younker?"

"Someone who apparently won't miss him if we take him away for thirty days," she said. "No matter what bungling treatment I give him, it's bound to be better than what he's used to. Letting a mere babe crawl around in the woods! Why, it's awful!"

"The mere babe doesn't seem to mind," I said. "Tell you what we'll do—we'll take care of him for a few days and see if anyone claims him. We'll listen to the radio and watch the papers and the ol' grapevine. If nobody is missing a kid, then we're all set. If someone does claim him, maybe we can make a deal for a loan. At any rate, we'll get to work on him right away."

At this juncture the baby eeled out of Mike's arms and took off across the grass. "Sweet Sue! Look at him go!" she said, scrambling to her feet. "Get him, Shorty!"

The infant, with twinkling heels, was crawling —running, really, on hands and knees—down toward the brook. I headed him off just as he reached the water, and snagged him up by the slack of his pants. As he came up off the ground he scooped up a handful of mud and pitched it into my eyes. I yelped and dropped him. When I could see a little daylight again I beheld Michaele taking a running brodie into a blackberry bush. I hurried over there, my eyelids making a nasty grating sound. Michaele was lying prone behind the baby, who was also lying prone, his little heels caught tightly in Mike's hands. He was nonchalantly picking blackberries.

Mike got her knees and then her feet under her, and picked up the baby, who munched contentedly. "I'm disgusted with you," she said, her eyes blazing. "Flinging an innocent child around like that! Why, it's a wonder you didn't break every bone in his poor little body!"

"But I— He threw mud in my—"

"Pick on someone your size, you big bully! I never knew till now that you were a sadist with an inferiority complex."

"And I never knew till now that it's true what they say about the guy in the three-cornered pants —the king can do no wrong! What's happened to your sense of justice, woman? That little brat there—"

"Shorty! Talking that way about a poor little baby! He's beautiful! He didn't mean anything by what he did. He's too young to know any better."

In the biggest, deepest bass voice I have ever heard, the baby said, "Lady, I do know what I'm doin'. I'm old enough!"

We both sat down.

"Did you say that?" Mike wanted to know.

I shook my head dazedly.

"Coupla dopes," said the baby.

"Who— What are you?" asked Mike breathlessly.

"What do I look like?" said the baby, showing his teeth. He had very sharp, very white teeth—two on the top gum and four on the lower.

"A little bundle of—"

"Shorty!" Mike held up a slim finger.

"Never mind him," growled the child. "I know lots of four-letter words. Go ahead, bud."

"You go ahead. What are you—a midget?"

I no sooner got the second syllable of that word out when the baby scuttled over to me and rocked my head back with a surprising right to the jaw. "That's the last time I'm going to be called that by anybody!" He roared deafeningly. "NO! I'm not a . . . a . . . what you said. I'm a pro tem changeling, and that's all."

"What on earth is that?" asked Mike.

"Just what I said!" snapped the baby "A pro tem changeling. When people treat their babies too well—or not well enough—I show up in their bassinets and give their folks what for. Only I'm always the spittin' image of their kid. When they wise up in the treatment, they get their kids back—not before."

"Who pulls the switch? I mean, who do you work for?"

The baby pointed to the grass at our feet. I had to look twice before I realized what he was pointing at. The blades were dark and glossy and luxuriant in a perfect ring about four feet in diameter.

Michaele gasped and put her knuckles to her lips. "The Little People!" she breathed.

I was going to say, "Don't be silly, Mike!" but her taut face and the baby's bland, nodding head stopped me.

"Will you work for us?" she asked breathlessly. "We need a baby for thirty days to meet the conditions of a will."

"I heard you talking about it," said the baby. "No."

"No?"

"No."

A pause. "Look, kid," I said, "what do you like? Money? Food? Candy? Circuses?"

"I like steaks," said the child gruffly. "Rare, fresh, thick. Onions. Cooked so pink they say, "Moo!" when you bite 'em. Why?"

"Good," I said. "If you work for us, you'll get all the steaks you can eat."

"No."

"What would you want to work for us?"

"Nothin'. I don't wanna work for you."

"What are we going to do?" I whispered to Mike. "This would be perfect!"

"Leave it to me. Look—baby—what's your name, anyway?"

"Percival. But don't call me Percival! Butch."

"Well, look, Butch; we're in an awful jam. If we don't get hold of a sockful of money darn soon, we'll lose that pretty little house over there."

"What's the matter with *him?* Can't he keep up the payments? What is he—a bum?"

"Hey, you—"

"Shut up, Shorty. He's just beginning, Butch. He's a graduate caterer. But he has to get a place of his own before he can make any real money."

"What happens if you lose th' house?"

"A furnished room. The two of us."

"What's the matter with that?"

I tensed. This was a question I had asked her myself.

"Not for me. I just couldn't live that way." Mike would wheedle, but she wouldn't lie.

Butch furrowed his nonexistent eyebrows. "Couldn't? Y' know, I like that. High standards." His voice deepened; the question lashed out at her. "Would you live with him in a furnished room if there were no other way?"

"Well, of course."

"I'll help you," said Butch instantly.

"Why?" I asked. "What do you expect to get out of it?"

"Nothing—some fun, maybe. I'll help you because you need help. That's the only reason I ever do anything for anybody. That's the only thing you should have told me in the first place—that you were in a jam. You and your bribes!" he snapped at me, and turned back to Mike. "I ain't gonna like that guy," he said.

I said, "I already don't like you."

As we started back to the house Butch said, "But I'm gonna get my steaks?"

Aunt Jonquil's house stood alone in a large lot with its skirts drawn primly up and an admonishing expression on its face. It looked as if it had squeezed its way in between two other houses to hide itself, and some scoundrel had taken the other houses away.

And Aunt Jonquil, like her house, was five times as high as she was wide, extremely practical, unbeautifully ornate, and stood alone. She regarded marriage as an unfortunate necessity. She herself never married because an unkind nature had ruled that she must marry a man, and she thought that men were uncouth. She disapproved of smoking, drinking, swearing, gambling, and loud laughter. Smiles she enjoyed only if she could fully understand what was being smiled at; she mistrusted innuendo. A polite laugh was a thing she permitted herself perhaps twice a week, providing it was atoned for by ten minutes of frozen-faced gravity. Added to which, she was a fine person. Swell.

On the way to the city, I sat through this unnerving conversation:

Butch said, "Fathead! Drive more carefully!"

"He's doing all right," said Mike. "Really. It surprises me. He's usually an Indian." She was looking very lovely in a pea-green linen jacket and a very simple white skirt and a buff straw hat that looked like a halo.

Butch was wearing a lace-edged bonnet and an evil gleam in his eye to offset the angelic combination of a pale-blue sweater with white rabbits applied on the sides, and fuzzy Angora booties on which he had insisted because I was wearing a navy-blue suit and he knew it would come off all over me. He was, I think, a little uncomfortable due to my rather unskilled handling of his diapering. And the reason for my doing that job was to cause us more trouble than a little bit. Butch's ideas of privacy and the proprieties were advanced. He would no more think of letting Mike bathe or change him than I would think of letting Garbo change me. Thinking about this, I said:

"Butch, that prudishness of yours is going to be tough to keep up at Aunt Jonquil's."

"You'll keep it up, son," said the infant, "or I'll quit working. I ain't going to have no women messin' around me that way. What d'ye think I am—an exhibitionist?"

"I think you're a liar," I said. "And I'll tell you why. You said you made a life's work of substituting for children. How could you with ideas like that? Who you trying to horse up?"

"Oh," said Butch, "that. Well, I might's well confess to you that I ain't done that kind of work in years. I got sick of it. I was gettin' along in life and . . . well, you can imagine. Well, about thutty years ago I was out on a job an' the woman was changin' my drawers when a half-dozen babes arrived from her sewin' circle. She left off workin' right where she was and sang out for them all to come in and see how pretty I looked the way I was. I jumped out o' th' bassinet, grabbed a diaper off th' bed an' held it in front of me while I called the whole bunch of 'em what they were and told them to get out of there. I got fired for it. I thought they'd put me to work hauntin' houses or cleanin' dishes for sick people or somethin', but no—they cracked down on me. Told me I'd have to stay this way until I was repentant."

"Are you?" giggled Mike.

Butch snorted. "Not so you'd notice it," he growled. "Repentant because I believe in common decency? Heh!"

We waited a long time after we rang the bell before Jonquil opened the door. That was to give her time to peep out at us from the tumorous bay window and compose her features to meet the niece by marriage her unfastidious nephew had acquired.

"Jonquil!" I said heartily, dashing forward and delivering the required peck on her cheek. Jonquil expected her relatives to use her leathery cheek precisely as she herself used a napkin. Pat. Dry surface on dry surface. Moisture is vulgar.

"And this is Michaele," I said, stepping aside.

Mike said, "How do you do?" demurely, and smiled.

Aunt Jonquil stepped back a pace and held her head as if she were sighting at Mike through her nostrils. "Oh, yes," she said without moving her lips. The smile disappeared from Mike's face and came back with an effort of will that hurt. "Come in," said Jonquil at last, and with some reluctance.

We trailed through a foyer and entered the

parlor. It wasn't a living room, it was an honest-to-goshness front parlor with antimacassars and sea shells. The tone of the room was sepia—light for the background of the heavily flowered wallpaper, dark for the furniture. The chairs and a hard-looking divan were covered with a material that looked as if it had been bleeding badly some months ago. When Butch's eye caught the glassed-in monstrosity of hay and dead flowers over the mantelpiece, he retched audibly.

"What a lovely place you have here," said Mike.

"Glad you like it," acknowledged Jonquil woodenly. "Let's have a look at the child." She walked over and peered at Butch. He scowled at her. "Good heavens!" she said.

"Isn't he lovely?" glowed Mike.

"Of course," said Jonquil without enthusiasm, and added, after searcing her store of ready-made expressions, "the little wudgums!" She kichy-cooed his chin with her sharp forefinger. He immediately began to wail, with the hoarse, high-pitched howl of a genuine baby.

"The poor darling's tired after his trip," said Mike.

Jonquil, frightened by Butch's vocal explosion, took the hint and led the way upstairs.

"Is the whole damn house like this?" whispered Butch hoarsely.

"No. I don't know. Shut up," said Mike. My sharp-eared aunt swiveled on the steps. "And go to sleepy-bye," she crooned aloud. She bent her head over his and hissed, "And keep on crying, you little wretch!"

Butch snorted and then complied.

We walked into a bedroom, austerely furnished, the kind of room they used in the last century for sleeping purposes only, and therefore designed so that it was quite unattractive to anyone with anything but sleep on his mind. It was all gray and white; the only spot of color in the room was the bedstead, which was a highly polished pipe organ. Mike lay the baby down on the bed and stripped off his booties, his shirt and his sweater. Butch put his fist in his mouth and waited tensely.

"Oh—I almost forgot. I have the very same bassinet you used, up in the attic," said Jonquil. "I should have had it ready. Your telegram was rather abrupt, Horace. You should have let me know sooner than you'd come today." She angled out of the room.

"Horace! I'll be— Is your name Horace?" asked Butch in delight.

"Yes," I said gruffly. "But it's Shorty to you, see, little man?"

"And I was worried about you callin' me Percival!"

I helped set up the bassinet and we tucked Butch in for his nap. I managed to be fooling around with his bedclothes when Mike bent over to dutifully give him a kiss. I grabbed Butch's chin and held it down so the kiss landed on his forehead. He was mightily wroth, and bit my finger till it bled. I stuck it in my pocket and told him, "I'll see you later, bummy-wummy!" He made a noise, and Jonquil fled, blushing.

We convened in the kitchen, which was far and away the pleasantest room in the house. "Where on earth did you get that child?" Jonquil asked, peering into a nice-smelling saucepan on the old-fashioned range.

"Neighbor's child," I said. "They were very poor and were glad to have him off their hands for a few weeks."

"He's a foundling," Mike ingeniously supplemented. "Left on their doorstep. He's never been adopted or anything."

"What's his name?"

"We call him Butch."

"How completely vulgar!" said Jonquil. "I will have no child named Butch in my house. We shall have to give him something more refined."

I had a brain wave. "How about Percival?" I said.

"Percival. Percy," murmured Jonquil, testing it out. "That is much better. That will do. I knew somebody called Percival once."

"Oh—you better not call him Percival," said Mike, giving me her no-good-can-come-of-this look.

"Why not?" I said blandly. "Lovely name."

"Yeah," said Mike. "Lovely."

"What time does Percival get his dinner?" asked Jonquil.

"Six o'clock."

"Good," said Jonquil. "I'll feed him!"

"Oh no, Aunt J— I mean, Miss Timmins. That's our job."

I think Jonquil actually smiled. "I think I'd like to do it," she said. "You're not making an inescapable duty out of this, are you?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Mike, a little coldly. "We *like* that child."

Jonquil peered intently at her. "I believe you do," she said in a surprised tone, and started out of the room. At the door she called back, "You needn't call me Miss Timmins," and she was gone.

"Well!" said Mike.

"Looks like you won the war, babe."

"Only the first battle, honey, and don't think I don't know it. What a peculiar old duck she is!" She busied herself at the stove, warming up some strained carrots she had taken out of a jar, sterilizing a bottle and filling it with pineapple juice. We had read a lot of baby manuals in the last few days!

Suddenly, "Where's your aunt?" Mike asked.

"I dunno. I guess she's— Good grief!"

There was a dry-boned shriek from upstairs and then the sound of hard heels pounding along the

upper hallway toward the front stairs. We went up the back stairs two at a time, and saw the flash of Jonquil's dimity skirts as she disappeared downstairs. We slung into the bedroom. Butch was lying in his bassinet doubled up in some kind of spasm.

"Now what?" I groaned.

"He's choking," said Mike. "What are we going to do, Shorty?"

I didn't know. Mike ran and turned him over. His face was all twisted up and he was pouring sweat and gasping. "Butch! Butch— What's the matter?"

And just then he got his wind back. *"Ho ho ho!"* he roared in his bullfrog voice, and lost it again.

"He's laughing!" Mike whispered.

"That's the funniest way I ever saw anyone commit sideways," I said glumly. I reached out and smacked him across the puss. "Butch! Snap out of it!"

"Ooh!" said Butch. "You lousy heel. I'll get you for that."

"Sorry, Butch. But I thought you were strangling."

"Guess I was at that," he said, and started to laugh again. "Shorty, I couldn't help it. See, that ol' vinegar visage come in here and started staring at me. I stared right back. She bends over the bassinet. I grin. She grins. I open my mouth. She open her mouth. I reach in and pull out her bridgework and pitch it out the windy. Her face sags down in the middle like a city street in Scranton. She does the steam-siren act and hauls on out o' here. But Shorty—Mike"—and he went off into another helpless spasm—"you shoulda seen her *face!*"

We had all subsided when Jonquil came in again. "Just tending to my petunias," she said primly. "Why—you have dinner on the table. Thank you, child."

"Round two," I said noncommittally.

Around two in the morning I was awakened by a soft thudding in the hallway. I came up on one elbow. Mike was fast asleep. But the bassinet was empty. I breathed an oath and tiptoed out into the hall. Halfway down was Butch, crawling rapidly. In two strides I had him by the scruff of the neck.

"Awk!"

"Shut up! Where do you think you're going?"

He thumbed at a door down the hall.

"No, Butch. Get on back to bed. You can't go there."

He looked at me pleadingly. "I can't? Not for *nothin'?*"

"Not for nothin'."

"Aw—Shorty. Gimme a break."

"Break my eyebrow! You belong in that bassinet."

"Just this once, huh, Shorty?"

I looked worriedly at Jonquil's bedroom door. "All right, dammit. But make it snappy."

Butch went on strike the third day. He didn't like those strained vegetables and soups to begin with, and then one morning he heard the butcher boy downstairs, singing out, "Here's yer steaks, Miss Timmins!" That was enough for little Percival.

"There's got to be a new deal around here, chum," he said the next time he got me in the room alone. "I'm gettin' robbed."

"Robbed? Who's taking what?"

"Youse. You promised me steaks, right? Listen, Shorty, I'm through with that pap you been feedin' me. I'm starvin' to death on it."

"What would you suggest," I asked calmly. "Shall I have one done to your taste and delivered to your room, sir?"

"You know what, Shorty? You're kiddin." He jabbed a tiny forefinger into the front of my shirt for emphasis. "You're kiddin', but I ain't. An' what you just said is a pretty good idea. I want a steak once a day—here in this room. I mean it, son."

I opened my mouth to argue and then looked deep into those baby eyes. I saw an age-old stubbornness, an insurmountable firmness of character there. I shrugged and went out.

In the kitchen I found Mike and Jonquil deeply engaged in some apparently engrossing conversation about rayon taffeta. I broke it up by saying, "I just had an idea. Tonight I'm going to eat my supper upstairs with Bu . . . Percival. I want you to get to know each other better, and I would commune with another male for a spell. I'm outnumbered down here."

Jonquil actually did smile this time. Smiles seemed to be coming to her a little more easily these days. "I think that's a lovely idea," she said. "We're having steak tonight, Horace. How do you like yours?"

"Broiled," said Mike, "and well d—"

"Rare!" I said, sending a glance at Mike. She shut up, wonderingly.

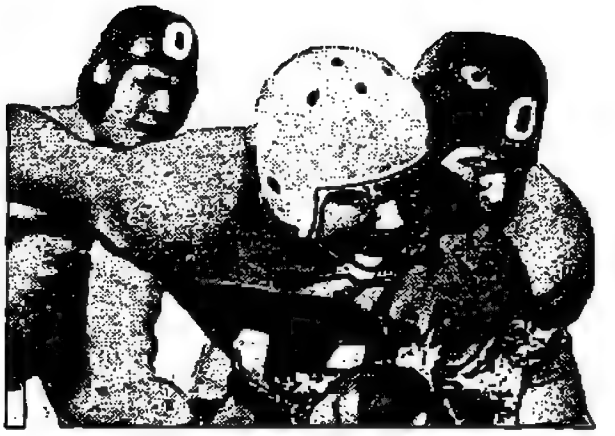
And that night I sat up in the bedroom, watching that miserable infant eat my dinner. He did it with gusto, with much smacking of the lips and grunting in ecstacy.

"What do you expect me to do with this?" I asked, holding up a cupful of lukewarm and sticky strained peas.

"*I* don't know," said Butch with his mouth full. "That's your problem."

I went to the window and looked out. Directly below was a spotless concrete walk which would certainly get spattered if I pitched the unappetiz-

FLASH!



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ing stuff out there. "Butch—won't you get rid of the stuff for me?"

He sighed, his chin all greasy from my steak. "Thanks, no," he said luxuriously. "Couldn't eat another bite."

I tasted the peas tentatively, held my nose and gulped them down. As I swallowed the last of them I found time to direct a great many highly unpleasant thoughts at Butch. "No remarks, *Percy*," I growled.

He just grinned. I picked up his plates and the cup and started out. "Haven't you forgotten something?" he asked sleepily.

"What?" He nodded toward the dresser and the bottle which stood on it. Boiled milk with water and corn syrup added. "Damned if I will!" I snapped.

He grinned, opened his mouth and started to wail.

"Shut up!" I hissed. "You'll have them women up here claiming I'm twisting your tail or something."

"That's the idea," said Butch. "Now drink your milk like a good little boy and you can go out and play."

I muttered something impotently, ripped the nipple off the bottle and gulped the contents.

"That's for telling the old lady to call me Percy," said Butch. "I want another steak tomorrow. 'Bye now."

And that's how it came about that I, a full-grown man in good health, lived for close to two weeks on baby food. I think that the deep respect I have for babies dates from this time, and is founded on my realization of how good-natured they are on the diet they get. It sure didn't work that way with me. What really griped me was having to watch him eat my meals. Brother, I was earning that thirty grand the hard way.

About the beginning of the third week Butch's voice began to change. Mike noticed it first and came and told me.

"I think something's the matter with him," she said. "He doesn't seem as strong as he was, and his voice is getting high-pitched."

"Don't borrow trouble, beautiful," I said, putting my arm around her. "Lord knows he isn't losing any weight on the diet he's getting. And he has plenty of lung power."

"That's another thing," she said in a puzzled tone. "This morning he was crying and I went in to see what he wanted. I spoke to him and shook him but he went on crying for almost five minutes before he suddenly sat up and said 'What? What? Eh—it's you, Mike.' I asked him what he wanted; he said nothing and told me to scram."

"He was kidding you."

She twisted out of my arm and looked up at me, her golden brows just touching over the snowy crevasse of her frown. "Shorty—he was crying —*real tears.*"

That was the same day that Jonquil went in to town and bought herself a half a dozen bright dresses. And I strongly suspect she had something done to her hair. She looked fifteen years younger when she came in and said, "Horace—it seems to me you used to smoke."

"Well . . . yes—"

"Silly boy! You've stopped smoking just because you think I wouldn't approve! I like to have a man smoking around the house. Makes it more homey. Here."

She pressed something into my hand and fled, red-faced and bright-eyed. I looked at what she had given me. Two packs of cigarettes. They weren't my brand, but I don't think I have ever been so deeply touched.

I went and had a talk with Butch. He was sleeping lightly when I entered the room. I stood there looking down at him. He is awful tiny, I thought. I wonder what it is these women gush so much about.

Butch's eyes were so big under his lids that the lids seemed as if they just couldn't stay closed. The lashes lay on his cheek with the most gentle of delicate touches. He breathed evenly, with occasionally a tiny catch. It made nice listening, somehow. I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye—his hand, clenching and unclenching. It was very rosy, and far too small to be so perfect. I looked at my own hand and at his, and I just couldn't believe it—

He woke suddenly, opening his eyes and kicking. He looked first at the window, and then at the wall opposite. He whimpered, swallowed, gave a little cry. Then he turned his head and saw me. For a long moment he watched me, his deep eyes absolutely unclouded; suddenly he sat up and shook his head. "Hello," he said sleepily.

I had the strange sensation of watching a person wake up twice in one awakening. He woke up first as a child, and then as Butch. I said, "Mike's worried about you." I told him why.

"Really?" he said. "I—don't feel much different. Heh! Imagine this happening to me?"

"Imagine what happening?"

"I've heard of it before, but I never . . . Shorty, you won't laugh at me, will you?"

I thought of all that baby food, and all those steaks. "Don't worry. You ain't funny."

"Well, you know what I told you about me being a changeling. Changelings is funny animals. Nobody likes 'em. They raise all kinds of hell. Fathers resent 'em because they cry all night Mothers get panicky if they don't know it's a changeling, and downright resentful if they do. A changeling has a lot of fun bein' a brat, but he don't get much emotional sugar, if you know what

I mean. Well, in my case . . . dammit, I can't get used to it! Me, of all people! . . . well, someone around here . . . uh . . . loves me."

"Not me," I said quickly, backing away.

"I know, not you." He gave me a sudden, bird-like glance and said softly, "You're a pretty good egg, Shorty."

"Huh? Aw—"

"Anyway, they say that if any woman loves a changeling, he loses his years and his memories, and turns into a real human kid. But he's got to be loved for himself, not for some kid he replaces." He shifted uneasily. "I don't . . . I can't get used to it happening to me, but . . . oh oh!" A pained expression came across his face and he looked at me helplessly. I took in the situation at a glance.

A few minutes later I corralled Mike. "Got something for you," I said, and handed her something made of layette cloth.

"What's . . . Shorty! Not—"

I nodded. "Butch's getting infantile," I said.

While she was doing the laundry a while later I told her what Butch had said. She was very quiet while I told her, and afterward.

"Mike—if there is anything in all this fantastic business, it wouldn't be you, would it, that's making this change in him?"

She thought it over for a long time and then said, "I think he's terribly cute, Shorty."

I swung her around. She had soapsuds on her temple, where her fingers had trailed when she tossed her bright hair back with her wrist.

"Who's number one man around here?" I whispered. She laughed and said I was silly and stood on tiptoe to kiss me. She's a little bit of a thing.

The whole thing left me feeling awful funny.

Our thirty days were up, and we packed. Jonquil helped us, and I've never seen her so full of life. Half the time she laughed, and once in a while she actually broke down and giggled. And at lunch she said to us, "Horace—I'm afraid to let you take little Percy back with you. You said that those people who had him were sort of ne'er-do-wells, and they wouldn't miss him much. I wish you'd leave him with me for a week or so while you find out just what their home life is like, and whether they really want him back. If not, I . . . well, I'll see that he gets a good place to live in."

Mike and I looked at each other, and then Mike looked up at the ceiling, toward the bedroom. I got up suddenly. "I'll ask him," I said, and walked upstairs.

Butch was sitting up in the bassinet trying to catch a sunbeam. "Hey!" I said. "Jonquil wants you to stick around. What do you say?"

He looked at me, and his eyes were all baby, nothing else.

"Well?"

He made some tremendous mental effort, pursed his lips, took a deep breath, held it for an unconscionable time, and then one word burst out. "Percy!"

"I get it," I said. "So long, fella."

He didn't say anything; just went back to his sunbeam.

"It's O. K. with him," I said when I got back to the table.

"You never struck me as the kind of man who would play games with children," laughed Jonquil. "You'll do . . . you'll do. Michaele, dear—I want you to write to me. I'm so glad you came."

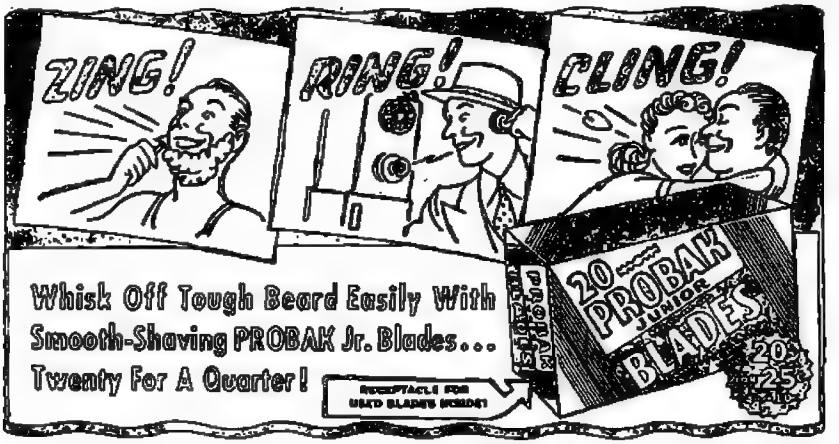
So we got our thirty grand. We wrote as soon as we reached the shack—*our* shack, now—that no, the people wouldn't want Percy back, and that his last name was—Fay. We got a telegram in return thanking us and telling us that Jonquil was adopting the baby.

"You goin' to miss ol' Butch?" I asked Mike.

"No," she said. "Not too much. I'm sort of saving up."

"Oh," I said.

THE END.



SNULBUG

By Anthony Boucher

● Meet Snulbug, the Inefficient Demon—two full inches of frustrated incompetence, the answer to a would-be sorcerer's underpowered prayer—

"That's a hell of a spell you're using," said the demon, "if I'm the best you can call up."

He wasn't much, Bill Hitchens had to admit. He looked lost in the center of that pentacle. His basic design was impressive enough—snakes for hair, curling tusks, a sharp-tipped tail, all the works—but he was something under an inch tall.

Bill had chanted the words and lit the powder with the highest hopes. Even after the feeble flickering flash and the damp fizzling *zzzt* which had replaced the expected thunder and lightning, he had still had hopes. He had stared up at the space above the pentacle waiting to be awe-struck until he had heard that plaintive little voice from the floor wailing, "Here I am."

"Nobody's wasted time and powder on a misfit like me for years," the demon went on. "Where'd you get the spell?"

"Just a little something I whipped up," said Bill modestly.

The demon grunted and muttered something about people that thought they were magicians.

"But I'm not a magician," Bill explained. "I'm a biochemist."

The demon shuddered. "I land the damnedest cases," he mourned. "Working for that psychiatrist wasn't bad enough, I should draw a biochemist. Whatever that is."

Bill couldn't check his curiosity. "And what did you do for a psychiatrist?"

"He showed me to people who were followed by little men and told them I'd chase the little men away." The demon pantomimed shooting motions. "*Woosh woosh* all day chasing nothing."

"And did they go away?"

"Sure. Only then the people decided they'd sooner have little men than me. It didn't work so good. Nothing ever does," he added woefully. "Yours won't, either."

Bill sat down and filled his pipe. Calling up

demons wasn't so terrifying, after all. Something quiet and homey about it. "Oh, yes, it will," he said. "This is foolproof."

"That's what they all think. People—" The demon wistfully eyed the match as Bill lit his pipe. "But we might as well get it over with. What do you want?"

"I want a laboratory for my embolism experiments. If this method works, it's going to mean that a doctor can spot an embolus in the bloodstream long before it's dangerous and remove it safely. My ex-boss, that screwball old occultist Reuben Choatsby, said it wasn't practical—meaning there wasn't a fortune in it for him—and fired me. Everybody else thinks I'm wacky, too, and I can't get any backing. So I need ten thousand dollars."

"There!" the demon sighed with satisfaction. "I told you it wouldn't work. That's out for me. They can't start fetching money on demand till three grades higher than me. I told you."

"But you don't," Bill grated, "appreciate all my fiendish subtlety. Look— Say, what is your name?"

The demon hesitated. "You haven't got another of those things?"

"What things?"

"Matches."

"Sure."

"Light me one, please?"

Bill tossed the burning match into the center of the pentacle. The demon scrambled eagerly out of the now cold ashes of the powder and dived into the flame, rubbing himself with the brisk vigor of a man under a needle shower. "There!" he gasped joyously. "That's more like it."

"And now what's your name?"

The demon's face fell again. "My name? You really want to know?"

"I've got to call you something."

"Oh, no, you don't. I'm going home. No money games for me."

"But I haven't expained yet what you are to do. What's your name?"

"Snulbug." The demon's voice dropped almost too low to be heard.

"Snulbug?" Bill laughed.

"Uh-huh. I've got a cavity in one tusk, my snakes are falling out, I haven't got troubles enough, I should be named Snulbug."

"All right. Now listen, Snulbug, can you travel into the future?"

"A little. I don't like it much, though. It makes you itch in the memory."

"Look, my fine snake-haired friend. It isn't a question of what you like. How would you like to be left there in that pentacle with nobody to throw matches at you?" Snulbug shuddered. "I thought so. Now you can travel into the future?"

"I said a little."

"And," Bill leaned forward and puffed hard at his corncob as he asked the vital question, "can you bring back material objects?" If the answer was no, all the fine febrile fertility of his spell-making was useless. And if that was useless, Heaven alone knew how the Hitchens Embolism Diagnosis would ever succeed in ringing down the halls of history, and incidentally saving a few thousand lives annually.

Snulbug seemed more interested in the warm clouds of pipe smoke than in the question. "Sure," he said. "Within reason I can—" He broke off and stared up piteously. "You don't mean— You can't be going to pull that old gag again?"

"Look, baby. You do what I tell you and leave the worrying to me. You can bring back material objects?"

"Sure. But I warn you—"

Bill cut him off short. "Then as soon as I release you from that pentacle, you're to bring me tomorrow's newspaper."

Snulbug sat down on the burned match and tapped his forehead sorrowfully with his tail tip. "I knew it," he wailed. "I knew it. Three times already this happens to me. I've got limited powers, I'm a runt, I've got a funny name, so I should run foolish errands."

"Foolish errands?" Bill rose and began to pace about the bare attic. "Sir, if I may call you that, I resent such an imputation. I've spent weeks on this idea. Think of the limitless power in knowing the future. Think of what could be done with it: swaying the course of empire, dominating mankind. All I want is to take this stream of unlimited power, turn it into the simple channel of humanitarian research, and get me ten thousand dollars; and you call that a foolish errand!"

"That Spaniard," Snulbug moaned. "He was a nice guy, even if his spell was lousy. Had a solid, comfortable brazier where an imp could keep warm. Fine fellow. And he had to go ask to see tomorrow's newspaper— I'm warning you—"

"I know," said Bill hastily. "I've been over in my mind all the things that can go wrong. And that's why. I'm laying three conditions on you before you get out of that pentacle. I'm not falling for the easy snares."

"All right." Snulbug sounded almost resigned. "Let's hear 'em. Not that they'll do any good."

"First: This newspaper must not contain a notice of my own death or of any other disaster that would frustrate what I can do with it."

"But shucks," Snulbug protested. "I can't guarantee that. If you're slated to die between now and tomorrow, what can I do about it? Not that I guess you're important enough to crash the paper."

"Courtesy, Snulbug. Courtesy to your master.

But I tell you what: When you go into the future, you'll know then if I'm going to die? Right. Well, if I am, come back and tell me and we'll work out other plans. This errand will be off."

"People," Snulbug observed, "make such an effort to make trouble for themselves. Go on."

"Second: The newspaper must be of this city and in English. I can just imagine you and your little friends presenting some dope with the Omsk and Tomsk *Daily Vuskutsukt.*"

"We should take that much trouble," said Snulbug.

"And third: The newspaper must belong to this space-time continuum, to this spiral of the serial universe, to this Wheel of If. However you want to put it. It must be a newspaper of the tomorrow which I myself shall experience, not of some other, to me hypothetical tomorrow."

"Throw me another match," said Snulbug.

"Those three conditions should cover it, I think. There's not a loophole there, and the Hitchens Laboratory is guaranteed."

Snulbug grunted. "You'll find out."

Bill took a sharp blade and duly cut a line of the pentacle with cold steel. But Snulbug simply dived in and out of the flame of his second match, twitching his tail happily, and seemed not to give a rap that the way to freedom was now open.

"Come on!" Bill snapped impatiently. "Or I'll take the match away."

Snulbug got as far as the opening and hesitated. "Twenty-four hours is a long way."

"You can make it."

"I don't know. Look." He shook his head, and a microscopic dead snake fell to the floor. "I'm not at my best. I'm shot to pieces lately, I am. Tap my tail."

"Do what?"

"Go on. Tap it with your fingernail right there where it joins on."

Bill grinned and obeyed. "Nothing happens."

"Sure nothing happens. My reflexes are all haywire. I don't know as I can make twenty-four hours." He brooded, and his snakes curled up into a concentrated clump. "Look. All you want is tomorrow's newspaper, huh? Just tomorrow's, not the edition that'll be out exactly twenty-four hours from now?"

"It's noon now—" Bill reflected. "Sure, I guess tomorrow morning's paper'll do."

"O. K. What's the date today?"

"August 21st."

"Fine. I'll bring you a paper for August 22nd. Only I'm warning you: It won't do any good. But here goes nothing. Good-by now. Hello again. Here you are." There was a string in Snulbug's horny hand, and on the end of the string was a newspaper.

"But hey!" Bill protested. "You haven't been gone."

"People," said Snulbug feelingly, "are dopes. Why should it take any time out of the present to go into the future? I leave this point, I come back to this point. I spent two hours hunting for this damned paper, but that doesn't mean two hours out of your time here. People—" he snorted.

Bill scratched his head. "I guess it's all right. Let's see the paper. And I know: You're warning me." He turned quickly to the obituaries to check. No Hitchens. "And I wasn't dead in the time you were in?"

"No," Snulbug admitted. "Not *dead*," he added, with the most pessimistic implications possible.

"What was I then? Was I—"

"I had Salamander blood," Snulbug complained. "They thought I was an undine like my mother and they put me in the cold-water incubator when any dope knows salamandry is a dominant. So I'm a runt and good for nothing but to run errands, and now I should make prophecies! You read your paper and see how much good it does you."

Bill laid down his pipe and folded the paper back from the obituaries to the front page. He had not expected to find anything useful there—what advantage could he gain from knowing who won the next naval engagement or which cities were bombed?—but he was scientifically methodical. And this time method was rewarded. There it was, streaming across the front page in vast black blocks:

MAYOR ASSASSINATED

FIFTH COLUMN KILLS CRUSADER

Bill snapped his fingers. This was it. This was his chance. He jammed his pipe in his mouth, hastily pulled a coat on his shoulders, crammed the priceless paper into a pocket, and started out of the attic. Then he paused and looked around. He'd forgotten Snulbug. Shouldn't there be some sort of formal discharge?

The dismal demon was nowhere in sight. Not in the pentacle nor out of it. Not a sign or a trace of him. Bill frowned. This was definitely not methodical. He struck a match and held it over the bowl of his pipe.

A warm sigh of pleasure came from inside the corncob.

Bill took the pipe from his mouth and stared at it. "So that's where you are?"

"I told you salamandry was a dominant," said Snulbug, peering out of the bowl. "I want to go along. I want to see just what kind of a fool you make of yourself." He withdrew his head into the glowing tobacco, muttering something about newspapers, spells, and, with a wealth of unhappy scorn, people.

The crusading mayor of Granton was a national figure of splendid proportions. Without hysteria,

red-baiting, or strike-breaking, he had launched a quietly purposeful and well-directed program against subversive elements which had rapidly converted Granton into the safest and most American city in the country. He was also a persistent advocate of national, State, and municipal subsidy of the arts and sciences—the ideal man to wangle an endowment for the Hitchens Laboratory, if he were not so surrounded by overly skeptical assistants that Bill had never been able to lay the program before him.

This would do it. Rescue him from assassination in the very nick of time—in itself an act worth calling up demons to perform—and then when he asks, "And how, Mr. Hitchens, can I possibly repay you?" come forth with the whole great plan of research. It couldn't miss.

No sound came from the pipe bowl, but Bill clearly heard the words, "Couldn't it just?" ringing in his mind.

He braked his car to a fast stop in the red zone before the city hall, jumped out without even slamming the door, and dashed up the marble steps so rapidly, so purposefully, that pure momentum carried him up three flights and through four suites of offices before anybody had the courage to stop him and say, "What goes?"

The man with the courage was a huge bull-necked plain-clothes man, whose bulk made Bill feel relatively about the size of Snulbug. "All right there," this hulk rumbled. "All right. Where's the fire?"

"In an assassin's gun," said Bill. "And it had better stay there."

Bullneck had not expected a literal answer. He hesitated long enough for Bill to push him to the door marked "Mayor—Private." But though the husky's brain might move slowly, his muscles made up for the lag. Just as Bill started to shove the door open, a five-pronged mound of flesh lit on his neck and jerked.

Bill crawled from under a desk, ducked Bullneck's left, reached the door, executed a second backward flip, climbed down from the table, ducked a right, reached the door, sailed in reverse, and lowered himself nimbly from the chandelier.

Bullneck took up a stand in front of the door, spread his legs in ready balance, and drew a service automatic from its holster. "You ain't going in there," he said, to make the situation perfectly clear.

Bill spat out a tooth, wiped the blood from his eyes, picked up the shattered remains of his pipe, and said, "Look. It's now twelve thirty. At twelve thirty-two a red-headed hunchback is going to come out on that balcony across the street and aim through the open window into the mayor's office. At twelve thirty-three His Honor is going to be slumped over his desk, dead. Unless you help me get him out of range."

"Yeah?" said Bullneck. "And who says so?"

"It says so here. Look. In the paper."

Bullneck guffawed. "How can a paper say what ain't even happened yet? You're nuts, brother, if you ain't something worse. Now go on, Scram. Go peddle your paper."

Bill's glance darted out the window. There was the balcony facing the mayor's office. And there coming out on it—

"Look!" he cried. "If you won't believe me, look out the window. See on that balcony? The red-headed hunchback? Just like I told you. Quick! We've got to—"

Bullneck stared despite himself. He saw the hunchback peer across into the office. He saw the sudden glint of metal in the hunchback's hand. "Brother," he said to Bill, "I'll tend to you later."

The hunchback had his rifle halfway to his shoulder when Bullneck's automatic spat and Bill braked his car in the red zone, jumped out, and dashed through four suites of offices before anybody had the courage to stop him.

The man with the courage was a huge bull-necked plain-clothes man, who rumbled, "Where's the fire?"

"In an assassin's gun," said Bill, and took advantage of Bullneck's confusion to reach the door marked "Mayor—Private." But just as he started to push it open, a vast hand lit on his neck and jerked.

As Bill descended from the chandelier after his third try, Bullneck took up a stand in front of the door, with straddled legs and drawn gun. "You ain't going in," he said clarifyingly.

Bill spat out a tooth and outlined the situation. "—at twelve thirty-three," he ended, "His Honor is going to be slumped over his desk dead. Unless you help me get him out of range. See. It says so here. In the paper."

"How can I? Gwan. Go peddle your paper."

Bill's glance darted to the balcony. "Look, if you won't believe me. See the red-headed hunchback? Just like I told you. Quick! We've got to—"

Bullneck stared. He saw the sudden glint of metal in the hunchback's hand. "Brother," he said, "I'll tend to you later."

The hunchback had his rifle halfway to his shoulder when Bullneck's automatic spat and Bill braked his car in the red zone, jumped out, and dashed through four suites before anybody stopped him.

The man who did was a bull-necked plain-clothes man, who rumbled—

"Don't you think," said Snulbug, "you've had about enough of this?"

Bill agreed mentally, and there he was sitting in his roadster in front of the city hall. His

clothes were unrumpled, his eyes were bloodless, his teeth were all there, and his corncob was still intact. "And just what," he demanded of his pipe bowl, "has been going on?"

Snulbug popped his snaky head out. "Light this again, will you? It's getting cold. Thanks."

"What happened?" Bill insisted.

"People!" Snulbug moaned. "No sense. Don't you see? So long as that newspaper was in the future, it was only a possibility. If you'd had, say, a hunch that the mayor was in danger, maybe you could have saved him. But when I brought it into now, it became a fact. You can't possibly make it untrue."

"But how about man's free will? Can't I do whatever I want to do?"

"Sure. It was your precious free will that brought the paper into now. You can't undo your own will. And, anyway, your will's still free. You're free to go getting thrown around chandeliers as often as you want. You probably like it. You can do anything up to the point where it would change what's in that paper. Then you have to start in again and again and again until you make up your mind to be sensible."

"But that—" Bill fumbled for words, "that's just as bad as . . . as fate or predestination. If my soul wills to—"

"Newspapers aren't enough. Time theory isn't enough. So I should tell him about his soul! People—" And Snulbug withdrew into the bowl.

Bill looked up at the city hall regretfully and shrugged his resignation. Then he folded his paper to the sports page and studied it carefuly.

Snulbug thrust his head out again as they stopped in the many-acred parking lot. "Where is it this time?" he wanted to know. "Not that it matters."

"The racetrack."

"Oh—" Snulbug groaned. "I might have known it. You're all alike. No sense in the whole caboodle. I suppose you found a long shot?"

"Darned tooting I did. Alhazred at twenty to one in the fourth. I've got five hundred dollars, the only money I've got left on earth. Plunk on Alhazred's nose it goes, and there's our ten thousand."

Snulbug grunted. "I hear his lousy spell, I watch him get caught on a merry-go-round, it isn't enough, I should see him lay a bet on a long shot."

"But there isn't a loophole in this. I'm not interfering with the future; I'm just taking advantage of it. Alhazred'll win this race whether I bet on him or not. Five pretty hundred-dollar pari mutuel tickets, and behold: The Hitchens Laboratory!" Bill jumped spryly out of his car and strutted along joyously. Suddenly he paused and addressed his pipe: "Hey! Why do I feel so good?"

Snulbug sighed dismally. "Why should anybody?"

"No, but I mean: I took a hell of a shellacking from that plug-ugly in the office. And I haven't got a pain or an ache."

"Of course not. It never happened."

"But I felt it then."

"Sure. In a future that never was. You changed your mind, didn't you? You decided not to go up there?"

"O. K., but that was after I'd already been beaten up twice."

"Huh-huh," said Snulbug firmly. "It was before you hadn't been." And he withdrew again into the pipe.

There was a band somewhere in the distance and the raucous burble of an announcer's voice. Crowds clustered around the two-dollar windows, and the five weren't doing bad business. But the hundred-dollar window, where the five beautiful pasteboards lived that were to create an embolism laboratory, was almost deserted.

Bill buttonholed a stranger with a purple nose. "What's the next race?"

"Second, Mac."

Swell, Bill thought. Lots of time. And from now on— He hastened to the hundred-dollar window and shoved across the five bills which he had drawn from the bank that morning. "Alhazred, on the nose," he said.

The clerk frowned with surprise, but took the money and turned to get the tickets.

Bill buttonholed a stranger with a purple nose. "What's the next race?"

"Second, Mac."

Swell, Bill thought. And then he yelled, "Hey!"

A stranger with a purple nose paused and said, "'Smatter, Mac?"

"Nothing," Bill groned. "Just everything."

The stranger hesitated. "Ain't I seen you some place before?"

"No," said Bill hurriedly. "You were going to, but you haven't. I changed my mind."

The stranger walked away shaking his head and muttering how the ponies could get a guy.

Not till Bill was back in his roadster did he take the corncob from his mouth and glare at it. "All right!" he barked. "What was wrong this time? Why did I get on a merry-go-round again? I didn't try to change the future?"

Snulbug popped his head out and yawned a tuskful yawn. "I warn him, I explain it, I warn him again, now I should explain it all over."

"But what did I do?"

"What did he do? You changed the odds, you dope. That much folding money on a long shot at a pari mutuel track, and the odds change. It wouldn't have paid off at twenty to one the way it said in the paper."

"Nuts," Bill muttered. "And I suppose that

applies to anything? If I study the stock market in this paper and try to invest my five hundred according to tomorrow's market—"

"Same thing. The quotations wouldn't be quite the same if you started in playing. I warned you. You're stuck," said Snulbug. "You're stymied. It's no use." He sounded almost cheerful.

"Isn't it?" Bill mused. "Now look, Snulbug. Me, I'm a great believer in Man. This universe doesn't hold a problem that Man can't eventually solve. And I'm no dumber than the average."

"That's saying a lot, that is," Snulbug sneered. "People—"

"I've got a responsibility now. It's more than just my ten thousand. I've got to redeem the honor of Man. You say this is the insoluble problem. I say there is no insoluble problem."

"I say you talk a lot."

Bill's mind was racing furiously. How can a man take advantage of the future without in any smallest way altering that future? There must be an answer somewhere, and a man who devised the Hitchens Embolus Diagnosis could certainly crack a little nut like this. Man cannot refuse a challenge.

Unthinking, he reached for his tobacco pouch and tapped out his pipe on the sole of his foot. There was a microscopic thud as Snulbug crashed onto the floor of the car.

Bill looked down half-smiling. The tiny demon's tail was lashing madly, and every separate snake stood on end. "This is too much!" Snulbug screamed. "Dumb gags aren't enough, insults aren't enough, I should get thrown around like a damned soul. This is the last straw. Give me my dismissal!"

Bill snapped his fingers gleefully. "Dismissal!" he cried. "I've got it, Snully. We're all set."

Snulbug looked up puzzled and slowly let his snakes droop more amicably. "It won't work," he said, with an omnisciently sad shake of his serpentine head.

It was the dashing act again that carried Bill through the Choatsby Laboratories, where he had been employed so recently, and on up to the very anteroom of old R. C.'s office.

But where you can do battle with a bull-necked guard, there is not a thing you can oppose against the brisk competence of a young lady who says, "I shall find out if Mr. Choatsby will see you." There was nothing to do but wait.

"And what's the brilliant idea this time?" Snulbug obviously feared the worst.

"R. C.'s nuts," said Bill. "He's an astrologer and a pyramidologist and a British Israelite—American Branch Reformed—and Heaven knows what else. He . . . why, he'll even believe in you."

"That's more than I do," said Snulbug. "It's a waste of energy."

"He'll buy this paper. He'll pay anything for it. There's nothing he loves more than futzing around with the occult. He'll never be able to resist a good solid slice of the future, with illusions of a fortune thrown in."

"You better hurry then."

"Why such a rush? It's only two thirty now. Lots of time. And while that girl's gone there's nothing for us to do but cool our heels."

"You might at least," said Snulbug, "warm the heel of your pipe."

The girl returned at last. "Mr. Choatsby will see you."

Reuben Choatsby overflowed the outsize chair behind his desk. His little face, like a baby's head balanced on a giant suet pudding, beamed as Bill entered. "Changed your mind, eh?" His words came in sudden soft blobs, like the abrupt glugs of pouring sirup. "Good. Need you in K-39. Lab's not the same since you left."

Bill groped for the exactly right words. "That's not it, R. C. I'm on my own now and I'm doing all right."

The baby-face soured. "Damned cheek. Competitor of mine, eh? What you want now? Waste my time?"

"Not at all." With a pretty shaky assumption of confidence, Bill perched on the edge of the desk. "R. C.," he said, slowly and impressively, what would you give for a glimpse into the future?"

Mr. Choatsby glugged vigorously. "Ribbing me? Get out of here! Have you thrown out—Hold on! You're the one— Used to read queer books. Had a grimoire here once." The baby-face grew earnest. "What you mean?"

"Just what I said, R. C. What would you give for a glimpse into the future?"

Mr. Choatsby hesitated. "How? Time travel? Pyramid? You figured out the King's Chamber?"

"Much simpler than that. I have here"—he took it out of his pocket and folded it so that only the name and the date line were visible—"tomorrow's newspaper."

Mr. Choatsby grabbed. "Let me see."

"Uh-huh. Naughty, naughty. You'll see after we discuss terms. But there it is."

"Trick. Had some printer fake it. Don't believe it."

"All right. I never expected you, R. C., to descend to such unenlightened skepticism. But if that's all the faith you have—" Bill stuffed the paper back in his pocket and started for the door.

"Wait!" Mr. Choatsby lowered his voice. "How'd you do it? Sell your soul?"

"That wasn't necessary."

"How? Spells? Cantrips? Incantations? Prove it to me. Show me it's real. Then we'll talk terms."

Bill walked casually to the desk and emptied his pipe into the ash tray.

"I'm underdeveloped. I run errands. I'm named Snulbug. It isn't enough—now I should be a testimonial!"

Mr. Choatsby stared rapt at the furious little demon raging in his ash tray. He watched reverently as Bill held out the pipe for its inmate, filled it with tobacco, and lit it. He listened awestruck as Snulbug moaned with delight at the flame.

"No more questions," he said. "What terms?"

"Fifteen thousand dollars." Bill was ready for bargaining.

"Don't put it too high," Snulbug warned. "You better hurry."

But Mr. Choatsby had pulled out his check book and was scribbling hastily. He blotted the check and handed it over. "It's a deal." He grabbed up the paper. "You're a fool, young man. Fifteen thousand! *Hmf!*" He had it open already at the financial page. "With what I make on the market tomorrow, never notice fifteen thousand. Pennies."

"Hurry up," Snulbug urged.

"Good-by, sir," Bill began politely, "and thank you for—" But Reuben Choatsby wasn't even listening.

"What's all this hurry?" Bill demanded as he reached the elevator.

"People!" Snulbug sighed. "Never you mind what's the hurry. You get to your bank and deposit that check."

So Bill, with Snulbug's incessant prodding, made a dash to the bank worthy of his descents on the city hall and on the Choatsby Laboratories. He just made it, by stop-watch fractions of a second. The door was already closing as he shoved his way through at three o'clock sharp.

He made his deposit, watched the teller's eyes bug out at the size of the check, and delayed long enough to enjoy the incomparable thrill of changing the account from William Hitchens to The Hitchen Research Laboratory.

Then he climbed once more into his car, where he could talk with his pipe in peace. "Now," he asked as he drove home, "what was the rush?"

"He'd stop payment."

"You mean when he found out about the merry-go-round. But I didn't promise anything. I just sold him tomorrow's paper. I didn't guarantee he'd make a fortune off it."

"That's all right. But—"

"Sure, you warned me. But where's the hitch? R. C.'s a bandit, but he's honest. He wouldn't stop payment."

"Wouldn't he?"

The car was waiting for a stop signal. The newsboy in the intersection was yelling "Uxtruh!" Bill glanced casually at the headline, did a double take, and instantly thrust out a nickel and seized a paper.

He turned into a side street, stopped the car, and went through this paper. Front page: MAYOR ASSASSINATED. Sports page: Alhazred at twenty to one. Obituaries: The same list he'd read at noon. He turned back to the date line. August 22nd.—Tomorrow.

"I warned you," Snulbug was explaining. "I told you I wasn't strong enough to go far into the future. I'm not a well demon, I'm not. And an itch in the memory is something fierce. I just went far enough ahead to get a paper with tomorrow's date on it. And any dope knows that a Tuesday paper comes out Monday afternoon."

For a moment Bill was dazed. His magic paper, his fifteen-thousand-dollar paper, was being hawked by newsies on every corner. Small wonder R. C. might have stopped payment! And then he saw the other side. He started to laugh. He couldn't stop.

"Look out!" Snulbug shrilled. "You'll drop my pipe. And what's so funny?"

Bill wiped tears from his eyes. "I was right. Don't you see, Snulbug? Man can't be licked. My magic was lousy. All it could call up was you. You brought me what was practically a fake, and I got caught on the merry-go-round of time trying to use it. You were right enough there; no good could come of that magic.

"But without the magic, just using human psychology, knowing a man's weaknesses, playing on them, I made a sirup-voiced old bandit endow the very research he'd tabooed and do more good for humanity than he's done in all the rest of his life. I was right, Snulbug. You can't lick Man."

Snulbug's snakes writhed into knots of scorn. "People!" he snorted. "You'll find out." And he shook his head with dismal satisfaction.

THE END.

THE HOUSE

By Jane Rice

⊙ The House hated. It had a grim and determinedly evil personality all its own, and it had set out to murder every member of the family, one by one—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

The house was old. Its lines were still good—square and plain—and there was a certain air about the paintless fluted columns that flanked the door, but it was unmistakably old. There were chinks between the red bricks where the mortar had cracked and fallen and had never been replaced. A chimney hugged the house on each side but they were ragged along the edges and from one a last year's bird's nest, like a tangled skein of soiled stiff yarn, waved its tattered ravelings with the wind. There was a sag to the roof, and the roof itself was a patchwork quilt of missing shingles. Dark, green blinds were drawn halfway in the windows and, from a distance, they gave the house a curious sleepy look, as if it dozed there on its unkempt lawn beneath its two scraggly wrecks of pines and dreamed of long gone golden days when horses and carriages had paused before its portico and there had been laughter and the crystal clink of glasses and the sheen of silk and satin and brocade.

Approaching the house, you saw the desolation immediately. Or was it desolation? Was it, perhaps, a solitude bleak and brooding? There was something about the house that reminded one of those hunched figures that sit, elbows on knees, chins in hands, on park benches and stare ahead of them at nothing at all. Stare, and stare, and when you are certain that they must be in a somnambulistic trance—they say, "Gotta smoke,

buddy?" and you realize with a guilty start they have been watching you all along. Weighing you. Sizing you up. Reading the thoughts you had let creep through your face.

As you drew nearer the house, you became conscious of this watchfulness. The green blinds, that from afar lent it the appearance of drowsiness, were like hooded eyelids that half veiled, half revealed the blank, opaque eyes that gazed down at you fixedly. Almost, one might say, maliciously. The effect was quite noticeable at sundown when the panes were stained with red and occasionally reflected a floating cloud, like a moving pupil.

You knew, intuitively, from the worn exterior of the house that the interior would be a dark well of scratched and unpolished mahogany, and that on the tables and mantelpieces would be green velvet scarves with tarnished gold tassels, that the pictures would be shadow-boxed, and the wallpaper scrolled, heavily embossed and indistinct with age, if not actually peeling. There would be, you felt sure, a musty, unaired smell in the rooms and the dust-dry scent of furnishings slowly decaying where they stood.

John Barr Evans drew this withered aroma into his lungs and thought perhaps he wouldn't mind it so much if the underlying thick, sweet headiness of calla lilies and tuberoses were absent. Funerals were wretched affairs as it was without having their aromatic habiliments clinging to the curtains, and eddying with the drafts over the doorsills and up the stairs. Flowers were futile things to heap upon the dead anyway. It made for a going-away-party atmosphere that was gruesome in its incongruity. Especially so in the case of Jordan Stone.

John Evans regarded the black, bombazine back of Abigail Stone. Straight, and unyielding. One pale, veined hand gripping a fold of faded damask drapery. He wondered what she was thinking. Of her brother lying neatly brushed and combed under a mound of earth piled with the same calla lilies and tuberoses that had left their cloying perfume here in this room? Of the future? Of the past?

Evans remembered the day they had come here. Come to Trelawney House. Come with their wisp of a mother and their granite-visaged father. Abigail, Jordon, and a spindly shanked sister. He remembered it well. It had been a deep June day with the sky a clear delft-blue. He had sat with his uncle in the front seat of the surrey with Julie Trelawney's brassbound trunk upended between his knees. The fringe around the surrey had jiggled as they went down the drive—and Julie Trelawney had cried. Soundlessly, without bothering to conceal it. She had sat on the leather seat behind them holding to the iron stanchions and he wouldn't have known about the crying if he hadn't looked back when they reached the bend. There was Trelawney House, serene and beautiful, its spirea a billowy cascade, its lawn dappled with summer shadows. And Julie Trelawney was crying. Sitting there, holding to the iron stanchions, crying. *She* hadn't looked back.

He had been horribly embarrassed at the sight of a "grown-up" with tears running unheeded down her cheeks, and had cracked his knuckles loudly and pretended that he hadn't seen. Poor, pretty, little Julie Trelawney.

Evans smiled wryly to himself and wondered if Abigail Stone knew that she *might* have had Trelawney blood in her veins. A farfetched "might" to be sure, but it certainly wasn't Ezikiel Stone's fault that there *wasn't* Trelawney blood in those blue and slightly prominent veins of Abigail's.

He recalled Abigail plainly that day. The day Julie Trelawney rode with him and his uncle down the graveled drive. They had passed the Stones on Half Mile Pike—the Stones on their way *to* Trelawney House. The Stone's hadn't turned their heads. They had ridden past without a word. Abigail, Jordan, the spindly shanked sister, the wisp of a mother and the granite-visaged father.

Hot and high the day had been. And still. Breathlessly still. Abigail's voice had carried clearly. A shrill child's voice.

"She's got curls," Abigail had said, the words floating back through the lazy summer hush. "I *hate* curls."

Abigail Stone drew the draperies across the window and turned to John Barr Evans. There was a sharpness about her features and a tightness around the narrow mouth. Her iron-gray hair was pulled back from her long, lean face until it seemed to be stretched to the limits of its endurance. Only her eyes were alive. Black and shining. Like a beetle's eyes, thought John Evans, as he cleared his throat.

"I can but reiterate," he said, "what I have already told you. You know how much money is left. If you persist in this foolhardy scheme there will be none. As I see it, you have but two choices. Live here frugally or, if you are determined to tear down the house, enter a Home of some sort. There is no market for this property today and, though the house is demolished, taxes will continue to accrue and there will not be sufficient money to pay them. You'll lose the grounds as well."

"The house will be torn down." The words dropped like cold pellets from the thin lips.

John Barr Evans sighed. "As your attorney, I cannot advise you too strongly against it."

"My mind is quite made up."

"I can understand your reluctance to live here. It is only natural to feel so. Death seems to leave a place strewn with reminders of the . . . ah . . .

departed. But this will pass. If you must do something, why not go away for a short while? You won't accomplish anything by destroying the house."

Abigail Stone moved her lips in a mirthless smile. "I will accomplish what I wish to accomplish," she said.

"But my dear Miss Stone—"

"My brother did not die accidentally." Her eyes flickered over the walls. "He was murdered."

John Evans sat bolt upright, aghast. "Mur . . . murdered!"

"Exactly."

"B . . . but, why, I . . . I understood the coroner said the plastering fell on him."

"It did. I can see him yet. I was standing at the head of the stairway. Jordan came into the great hall. There was the queerest look about him. I think he knew that something was about to happen. He saw me. He tried to speak and couldn't. He waved his arms at me as if to warn me not to come down those stairs. There was a grinding noise—a hideous chuckling—and the plaster came down. He screamed. Once. Like a spiked horse. Yes, the plaster fell on him, all right."

"But Miss Stone! That isn't *murder*."

"Isn't it?"

"No. Good heavens no."

"My sister Eloise fell down the cellar steps when she was fifteen. That wasn't murder either, I suppose?"

"How could it be? Unless someone pushed her?"

"No one pushed her. No one pushed my father from the attic window, either."

"Your father was subject to dizzy spells."

"Yes. Clever, wasn't it, to lay the blame for a murder on a diseased liver."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

Abigail Stone looked steadily at John Evans. "This house killed them. All of them. One by one. Slowly, easily, and at carefully spaced intervals so that no one might suspect. But I knew. Jordan knew, too. What good it did him." Again that frozen smile played across her lips. "So now I shall kill this house. Slowly, easily, room by room, I shall kill it."

"This *house* killed your family!"

"Yes."

"How could a *house*— Are you quite well, Miss Stone?"

"Quite. And this house committed these murders as I have told you. It plunged my father from an attic window, it tumbled my sister down the cellar steps, it dropped the ceiling on my brother's head. No doubt it has plans for me. I shall anticipate them with plans of my own—for it."

Evans coughed gently. "Forgive me for mentioning it, but your mother wasn't mur . . . that is, she didn't die in this house."

"My mother was a weak and foolish woman. She was never a Stone. The house didn't hate her as it hated us. I think, mayhap, it felt a genuine contempt for her, but not that livid vindictiveness it held for the rest of us. No, it didn't kill her. It was content with driving her insane. You may mention her insanity all you like. I am not ashamed of it. I repeat, she was never a Stone. My father tried hard to make her into one, but it was useless. The material was shoddy. It came apart in his grasp."

"Mary Stone was a gentlewoman," Evans said flatly.

"She was an episode," Abigail replied unruffled. "A means to an end." She held up one thin-fingered hand as John Evans opened his mouth. "Don't bother, please. I'm sick of platitudes. Sick to death of them. You know as well as I that my father married her to get even with Julie Trelawney. As if it would. As if Julie Trelawney cared a tinker's damn who he married. Oh, I daresay after she had run through her inheritance and the house was sold from under her very feet, I daresay *then* she cared. My father thought he had his revenge when he bought this house—Trelawney House." Abigail Stone clenched her fists at her side and lifted her chin. "After all these years it is *still* called Trelawney House. Is *that* revenge! Oh, no." She leaned forward ever so slightly, like a winter seed. "The morning Julie Trelawney died of Spanish influenza my father came home and closed himself in his room and wouldn't answer anyone. I looked through the keyhole and he was just sitting there by the deal table staring at the floor. He looked awful, as if his face had come to pieces. Is *that* revenge? Is it revenge to stand idly by and see your nearest kin murdered by the very house that was bought for the sole purpose of revenge? *Is* that revenge? Is it, Mr. Evans? Tell me, is that *revenge!*"

"You're overwrought, Miss Stone. This has been a trying day. Possibly it would be best if I came back tomorrow."

"You haven't answered me, Mr. Evans."

John Barr Evans removed his spectacles and polished them briskly. He thought longingly of his stuffy law offices and Miss Perkins in her paper cuffs and the water container with the bubble in the middle.

"There was nothing to revenge," he said mildly. "Julie Trelawney was . . . well, Julie Trelawney. If she took your father's offer of marriage lightly, it was because she took everything lightly, except losing Trelawney House. She loved it very much."

"She made my father a laughingstock. Don't think I don't know. As a child, I could see it in

peoples' expressions. I could see them looking at my mother and thinking, "You fool. You miserable fool to beget his children when he wants only Julie Trelawney." Her nostrils quivered and her eyes were like burning coals. "Trelawney House," she said, and the name was an epithet. "House of Hate, and Fear, and Death. Maniac House. *Pfah!*"

Evans placed his glasses firmly on his nose and stood up. "It's growing late, Miss Stone. I'll call on you again in a few days when you are . . . have . . . er . . . rested."

"It won't be necessary. I want you to make the arrangements."

"Then you are adamant?"

"I am."

"I implore you to think it over."

"I have."

"Very well."

"When will the work begin?"

"I will let you know as soon as the details are completed."

"Thank you."

"Not at all."

Abigail Stone watched him down the drive. Then she closed the door and shot the bolt home. She walked with measured pace into the center of the hall and stood beneath a jagged rent in the ceiling, the laths showing through with crumbles of plaster clinging to them.

"I shall kill you," she said loudly and distinctly. "Do you hear? I shall kill you, kill you, KILL YOU." She threw back her head and laughed, laughed as if she would never stop and, still laughing, she bunched her skirt in one hand and went upstairs while a tiny echo whispered—ill oooo—ll ooo—l oo—from wall to wall, and a draft of air rustled the curtains and made a faint hissing sound along the weatherstripping.

Alice Evans pulled the thread tight in her embroidery and smoothed it with a well-manicured thumbnail.

"I don't care," she said, "I think it's a shame to tear down Trelawney House. You oughtn't to let her."

John Barr Evans lowered his newspaper and looked at his wife with a mixture of amusement and exasperation.

"How am I to stop her?" he asked.

"Why, just *stop* her." Alice Evans stuck the needle in her sewing and put it on her lap with an approving pat.

"Just stop her," mimicked John Evans satirically. "Just stop a locomotive, or a windstorm, or an avalanche. She is obsessed with the idea, my dear, and Abigail Stone is, at one and the same time, an immovable object and an irresistible force."

"But why in creation does she want to tear it down? Land sakes, I should think it'd be better to take a whopping loss and get something for it instead of going ahead and paying *out* good money to have it wrecked."

Momentarily John Barr Evans toyed with the impulse to say aloud, "It murdered her family." But he didn't. He wanted to read his newspaper and a remark like that dropped from the blue into Alice's ears wasn't—well, hang it all, women loved morbidity. Alice would keep him awake half the night chirping, "What *else* did she say, John? Do you think maybe *she* did away with them? Her mother was crazy, I've heard. Could it be there's a *streak?*" And things like that.

"She seems to feel that . . . uh . . . that the house is a Nemesis more or less."

"A Nemesis?"

"Yes. Her people all died there, you know. Violently, you might say. I think the house has a sort of personality to her. She loathes it."

"Personality?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a personality?"

"Oh, Alice, I don't know. She's just determined to tear it down, that's all. Now let me—"

"Do you mean she thinks *she* might die violently, too?"

"I guess so."

"What did she *say*, John?"

"She said she wanted it demolished. For the love of heaven, it's her house, isn't it?"

"No, I mean about the dying."

"She said her father, sister, brother had died in it and she was going to tear it down. If you saw your brother die, you'd feel the same way."

"I don't have a brother."

"I said *if*."

"And she was right there."

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"The plaster fell on him."

"I know. I mean what'd he do?"

John Evans rattled his newspaper and took a long breath. One might have said he was counting up to ten v-e-r-y slowly.

"He stood in the hall. Abigail stood on the stairs. He tried to speak but couldn't. He gestured at her not to come down the stairs. The plaster went *brrrrrrumph*. It fell on him. He died. He had a varnished coffin with black handles. He looked very natural except for a bruise on his forehead. He was buried. Abigail is going to tear down the house. The arrangements are made. They begin day after tomorrow. Don't trouble your head about it."

John Evans once more elevated the newspaper and then lowered it again to add, "Or mine, either. I've got more to worry about than what Abigail

Stone does with that . . . that mausoleum."

"It's a wonder it didn't break the windows. Did you know the fanlight over the front door was brought all the way from Europe? My great-aunt, Sade Pendergast, that's the Baltimore Pendergasts, said that it was packed just like jewelry. Come to think of it, houses *do* have personalities." Alice Evans resumed her fancywork. "I never thought of it before, but they do. Great-aunt Sade had the most prim and proper house you ever saw in all your born days." She looked up with a smile. "She had a dreadful time keeping up to its standard of living."

She continued ruminatively: "There was a house on Brown Street, too. A big bully of a thing. Somebody was always getting hurt there. John—"

"Hum?"

"John, you're not listening."

"What is it, Alice?"

"What kind of personality do you think our house has?"

"Um-um."

"Oh, put your paper down. It won't evaporate. What kind of personality has our house?"

"House? Personali— For heaven's sake, *I* don't know."

"You know what I think? I think it doesn't have *any*. I think we ought to get new draperies, and some slipcovers. Marge Baxter has some darling ones. Candy stripe. And she painted the walls with caseine paint. Right over the wallpaper. Cocoa. I think it's high time we— John, you aren't listening."

"Alice, for the sweet love of Christmas, *will* you let me read my paper? I don't give a snap what Marge Baxter did. I like our house the way it is. I think it's *fine*. Now, go on and sew or something, will you?"

"I guess you want our house to look like Trelawney House. All decrepit and seedy."

"Trelawney House looks all right. It's all right. All right. It says here there's a bond issue coming—"

"Trelawney House looks all right? Don't be crazy. Crazy . . . hm-m-m, didn't Mrs. Stone die in an asylum or some place? John, do you suppose there's a *streak?* I mean after all it sounds sort of silly for Jordan Stone to stand in the hall mouthing at his sister and whirling his arms while the ceiling fell on him. What I mean is—"

But John had gone, paper and all. He closed the door of the den and muttered vehemently, "Women!"

Alice Evans took a tiny stitch and gave a sigh.

"Men!" murmured Alice Evans.

Abigail Stone lay long and straight in her bed, her toes and knees making knobby humps under the covers. She listened.

Flap, flap, flap, flapflapflapflap, flap.

She had forgotten to close the attic window and the shade was rattling. She had opened the window when she had gone up to put Jordan's things away in the trunk. The odor of camphor had made her queasy and she had opened the window. When John Evans had called, she must have forgotten to close it as she went to let him in.

She slipped out of bed and thrust her bony feet into felt house slippers. Her unbleached muslin nightgown hung loosely about her and her two braids of hair swung across the back like pendulums as she crossed the uncarpeted floor.

John Evans was an ass. A didactic ass. Go away for a short while, should she. Run away, he meant. Let the house have the satisfaction of knowing it had licked the Stones. That it had driven the last one out. Not she!

Flap, flap, flapflapflap, flap.

She should have brought a lamp. The stairs were steep. But no matter. Feel the way easily, easily. It wouldn't *dare*. Not so soon after Jordan. It would wait patiently, prudently, as always, and then—ah, then it would be too late. *It* would be dead. A heap of rubble. A moldering pile of trash. Easily, the top step was shaky.

Flap, flap.

The moon had buttered the attic window sill with silver and a shaft cut a swath through the darkness, glancing off the hammered metal corners of a battered wooden trunk, touching shrouded pieces of furniture, striking a twinkling response from a shelf of empty Mason jars.

Flapflapflapflap.

Abigail Stone moved across to the window. The attic still reeked of camphor. It made her ill. Camphor, asafetida, cooking cabbage. They had always made her ill. She stood by the window breathing in the cool night air. Below, the back yard was rimmed with a thicket of shadows with the round silver space in the center where the moonlight lay like a pool—a faint, far away pool. Clear as water. Alluring, somehow.

She leaned out of the window. How quiet it looked. And calm.

Her feet slipped on the flooring, she scrabbled with her fingernails at the sill, clawed desperately at the flaking wood to keep her balance. For an instant her head swam and her heart beat wildly in her throat. Then she regained her footing.

She crouched against the boards, a shapeless huddle.

"Damn you," she said and her voice sounded as if she had been running.

"Damn you, *damn* you!"

A trickle of dust dribbled from one of the rafters.

"You won't do it," she said through her teeth. "I will see to it that you don't. Hear me? I will see to it!"

She closed the window and felt her way to the door and down the stairs. One at a time. Warily.

"I must be very careful. I must watch it," she said to herself. "I must be on guard. Every minute."

She reached her room and crept into her bed. Again she lay long and straight, her knees and toes making hummocks under the blanket. With wide open eyes she glared ceilingwards.

"Damn you!" she screeched into the engulfing blackness.

Emmy Brill put a fresh scarf on the potbellied dresser, plunked a pin tray on top of it, gave the counterpane a final twitch and—hands on her ample hips—stood back to admire the effect.

"Just the same," said Emmy Brill, "I'm not giving her any leeway. You know what Joe said about her being so particular and all. I don't want a stone left on a stone, he says she says. I want it leveled. Flat. Flat to the ground. And Joe says perky like, like Joe does, I'll murder it. And she says, see that you do. She's a queer one, that one is."

"Yeah. Funny, ain't it, her being so all fired anxious to have that there place tore down? Joe said it wouldn't be no trouble though, it was ready to fall apart as it was. He said it was as wobbly as a bridegroom's knees. Joe's a card, he is."

"All the Brills are cards," Emmy said, "every lasting one of them."

Gus expanded and popped his suspenders impor-

Gus Brill lounged in the doorway.

"Don't know what you're fussing so about," he observed around his toothpick, "you'd think it was company 'stead of a boarder. Besides it ain't like she was a permanent. She's only goin' to stay till the house is tore down."

Mrs. Brill surveyed her husband pityingly. "There's boarders and boarders," was her scathing comment. "Abigail Stone isn't going to sniff down her nose at me."

Mr. Brill shifted his toothpick. "You needn't worry none," he said. "That place of her'n ain't no bargain. Lee Plunkett—he give her an estimate on crating and storing her belongings—he says there's more relics than was in Noah's ark, and so far as he can tell ain't none of them been moved for going on forty year."

tantly. "Yeah," he agreed. "Yeah, I guess we are at that."

"Yessir, all the Brills are cards," Emmy repeated musingly, "and I had to pick the joker."

"Yeah, guess maybe you did at tha— Now, look here, how'd you mean that? That there had the earmarks of a dirty crack, Emmy Brill."

"Forget it, dearie. You finished tacking that hall runner yet?"

"Tunket with the hall runner. I want to know what you meant by that there remark. Joker, am I? I'd like to know what you'd do without me around. You'd sing a different tune out of the side of your face, you would. Joker, eh? The Brills are—"

"You'll find the tacks on the pantry shelf, and when you get done with that you can fix the drip

in the kitchen faucets, and there's a curtain rod in the downstairs closet that needs—"

But Gus Brill had departed.

"Women!" he said, as he rummaged on the pantry shelf and helped himself to a cup cake.

Emmy Brill stooped and retrieved a frayed toothpick.

"Men!" said Emmy Brill.

The day dawned damp and gray, as if it had been poured over the late autumn landscape from a gigantic dish pan. Wet leaves dotted the browning grass and lay in soggy clusters beneath the trees whose boles were black and glistening and whose branches resembled skinny arms with crooked and multitudinous elbows. A hawk circling effortlessly in the lowering sky might have been searching for a leftover scrap of summer and, if it saw the top-heavy truck rattling up the drive to Trelawney House, it made no sign beyond a slow flap of its wings to gain altitude.

With a deft twist of his wrist, Lee Plunkett swung the truck even with the cracked stone stoop, shut off the ignition, said, "O. K., boys," and climbed out, followed by three hefty men whose washed-out denim uniforms bore the legend, "Plunkett's Transfer. You Call, We Haul."

Abigail Stone was waiting for them. She was dressed in the bombazine, an overall cloak, and a hat that Lee Plunkett secretly thought looked like it should have a tambourine to go with it. A suitcase, a brown paper parcel tied securely with a string, an umbrella and a pair of rubbers were piled on a chair.

"Morning, ma'am." Lee Plunkett doffed his cap.

"You may begin, Mr. Plunkett."

"Yes'm." He indicated the heap on the chair. "You want these should go?"

"No. These go with me. Mr. Evans will be by later. There are three jars of quince jelly in the cellar storeroom. Will you bring them up, please?"

"Yes'm. O. K., boys. Get them tarpaulins out. Use them burlap runners in the hall. Catawise. Hank, you go on upstairs and begin on the beds. Jim, you and Pete get started with them barrels and handle that chiny like it was chiny, not cast iron. O. K. Get going."

The work progressed smoothly. Abigail Stone sat tall and unmoving, a gaunt, forbidding figure, hands laced in her lap and, expressionless, watched the proceedings.

Tables and chairs passed by on the heads and backs of Hank, Jim and Pete. Dressers and cabinets were struggled out, and barrels—nailed and headed—were wheeled past on loading trays. The windows were denuded of their draperies and the mantelpieces lost their ancient finery. The floors were uncovered and laid bare, and lightish squares appeared on the wallpaper where pictures had hung. A seamstress' figure, headless and armless, with a wire skirt, stood familiarly close to the pedestaled bust of Goethe with blind, white eyes and a chip off one marble ear. A rose tree lamp whose shade peeked out from its wooden crate at a framed sampler which asked God to bless its home, leaned dejectedly against a grandfather's clock whose cuckoos, inextricably tangled in a snarled nest of rusted wire, dangled helplessly down its face.

Once or twice Abigail Stone consulted the watch pinned to her flat bosom but, otherwise, remained as statuesque as the one-legged Indian girl with four broken fingers who gazed impassively from under her cupped plaster palm into the middle distance.

It was approaching noon when Lee Plunkett, sweating profusely, streaked with dirt and wearing a cobweb on his cap brim, clomped down the stairs and said, "Soon as the boys bring down the trunk we're through. Be glad to give you a lift in."

Abigail inclined her head. "Mr. Evans should be here any minute."

"Yes'm." He picked up the Indian girl and carried her out over his shoulder and she didn't seem to mind, only gazed on intently under her cupped palm at the stairway which resounded with the heavy footsteps of laden men.

"Hold 'er, can't you?" came a voice from above. "Whatcha doin' anyhow, sittin' on it!"

"Zat so! Whatcha got in those arms of yours besides fat? Hoist 'er up, or won't your backbone take it?"

"Aw, pipe down. Easy now and quit hurryin'. Your stomach'll wait for its dinner. Damme but this thing's unwieldy."

"The devil's hitching a ride on it. Get goin', will you? I'm hungry."

Abigail Stone unlaced her hands and gripped the chair arms. Her eyes narrowed. She swallowed. Convulsively.

"Take it easy," came the voice.

"Whatcha want I should do—crawl with it?"

Slowly Abigail Stone arose. One hand made a sort of fluttering movement. Her lips were parted and the watch on her chest surged with the strenuousness of her breathing.

Two buckle-kneed, denimed legs appeared on the stairs, their owner's beet-red face came next, his arms extended behind him, his horny hands grasping the corners of the trunk.

Abigail Stone picked up her parcels and quickly—with long strides—stalked down the hall. A jar of jelly fell from her arms and rolled around on the floor. She didn't stop.

Two more denimed legs appeared.

"What you need—" the second voice began mockingly but it didn't finish. It broke sharply,

there was a scuffling of feet, a grunt, confused shouting, a splintering crash.

Abigail Stone, her hat bobbing on her head, ran like one possessed for the front door. She gained it and was outside as—with a thundering smack—the trunk crashed against the paneling. The fanlight fell with a musical tinkle in a hundred multicolored pieces about her.

"Holy jumping grasshoppers!" bellowed Lee Plunkett, popping out of the van like a choleric cricket. "What do you think you're doing!" Shaking his fist and calling upon his Maker in no uncertain terms and with many and detailed instructions, he dashed up the steps, brushed by Abigail and clambered over the wreckage.

"He pushed it," said Pete.

"He pulled it," protested Hank.

"You numbskulls," roared Mr. Plunkett.

"Wow!" said Jim, swinging down from the back of the truck and shaking his head at Abigail Stone, "that was a close one, ma'am. Mighty close. Mighty doggone close."

But Abigail Stone didn't hear him. It is doubtful if she was even aware of his presence.

She swept the house with a poisonous look. "Curse you," she said, "curse your evil, rotten core." She drew herself up. "Murderer!" she flung at it venomously.

Jim scratched his brow. "Ma'am?"

John Barr Evans pulled up behind the truck.

"Good morning—" he began, but stopped as he surveyed the tableaux. "Something wrong?"

"Trunk fell," Jim said laconically.

Abigail turned and gave Evans an icicle smile.

"It tried again," she said.

Lee Plunkett poked a cerise countenance around the jamb. "Morning, John."

"What happened, Lee?"

"These buzzards pretty near brained Miss Stone here with a trunk."

"He pushed it," said Pete.

"He pulled it," insisted Hank.

"Well," said John Evans cheerily, "accidents will happen in the best of families."

"Accidents!" said Abigail Stone scornfully.

Lee Plunkett mopped his perspiring cranium. "They didn't go to do it," he said. "Mr. Evans here is right. No matter how careful you are, there's a law of averages. I'll pay for what's broke, Miss Stone. Here, you Jim, put Miss Stone's things in the car. What do you think you're doing—I ain't giving you sixty cents an hour to sunburn your tonsils. I'll say this, Miss Stone, I'm right sorry it happened. It's a good thing you got up outn that chair. You'd agot it shore."

"Yes," said Abigail. Like Jordan. It must be disappointed."

"Put 'em in the baggage compartment, you lunkhead. Yes'm. Shore must be dis— *Who* must be disappointed?"

"The house."

She got in the car and stared straight ahead as John Evans, with a good-natured wave at Plunkett, changed gears and piloted the coupé around the curve and down the drive.

Lee Plunkett shoved his cap back and said, puzzled, "Now what was she talking about?"

"I dunno," Jim answered. "If you asks me, I don't think she knows whether she's afoot or on horseback."

"What did you have to pull it for?" Hank looked disgustedly at Pete.

"What did *I*— Say, don't give me that. You pushed it. You know durn good and well you pushed it."

"Get going," yelled Lee Plunkett, "afore I pastes all three of you."

This was twice, Evans thought, that he had taken someone away from Trelawney House. The days had been typical of the people, too. Julie Trelawney had left on a sunshiny June day filled with honeysuckle and butterflies. Abigail Stone was leaving on a damp, chill day filled with dead leaves and overgrown clumps of crab grass gone to seed.

They came to the bend.

"Stop, please," said Abigail and, as Evans complied, she swiveled in her seat and looked back at the house. Evans thought he had never seen such an expression of pure, eighteen-carat, unadulterated hate. He averted his eyes hastily. It wasn't decent for people to let their emotions get beyond their skins. Not *that* kind, anyway.

"You may proceed." Abigail resumed her normal posture of unbending righteousness.

Once more Evans shifted gears. What a woman. A basilisk would be a positive pleasure. Stone was the correct name, no mistaking that. A tall, thin, pallid stone with God-knew-what scurrying around underneath it, and lots of horrid, moldy patches on top of it. *Pfui.*

"I made application for you at Fairmount Haven, Miss Stone. You may enter two weeks from today. In the meantime, I hope you will enjoy your stay with the Brills. Mrs. Brill is a bit talkative, but a very fine woman."

"Humph."

Evans tried again. "Well, I guess it'll soon be winter."

"Undoubtedly."

"See in the paper where there was a fire over at Harpersville. Tobacco warehouse. Fifty thousand dollars, so they say."

Silence.

John Evans fought down a well-nigh uncontrollable desire to say, "Boo!"

"You're preoccupied this morning, Miss Stone." The old sphinx.

"You would be, also, Mr. Evans, had you missed being murdered—by inches."

"Oh come, come. Trunks are forever falling. Trunks, safes, grand pianos. True, it was fortunate that you weren't in the hall, but—"

"It wasn't fortune, Mr. Evans. It was knowledge. I knew that trunk was going to fall—as surely as Jordan knew the plastering was going to fall. It was a flash. A sudden, instantaneous recognition of impending danger. Brilliant as a white burst of light."

"Women are noted for their sixth sense. Knew a case once where—"

"Last night I almost fell from the attic window."

"You did?"

"I did."

"So many of us are susceptible to height. Why, I remember when Alice and I took that trip to the Grand Canyon, she—"

"And if I hadn't left three jars of quince jelly on the shelf in the storeroom, I would now be buried under a slide of earth."

"Quince jelly, you say? My favori—"

"Yes. This morning I remembered about the three jars. I went down in the cellar to get them. The storeroom is really a recess in one wall closed off by a door. I opened the door. There was the quince jelly. I could see the adhesive that served as labels. But I didn't get it, Mr. Evans."

"Why not, pray?"

"Because I knew that as soon as I entered that storeroom the earthen wall would cave in on me."

"How did you know that?"

"I simply knew it."

"The wall didn't cave in, though."

"No. I didn't go inside, you see. I sent Mr. Plunkett down for it."

"Well, I'll be a— What if it had caved in on him?"

"Why should it? He isn't a Stone."

"Look here, Miss Stone, I think that unquestionably your imagination is running wild."

"Do you indeed?"

"I do. I mean it's a bit farfetched, isn't it? Houses don't—"

"That house does," Abigail Stone interrupted. "I realize you think I am dominated by a misplaced fixation. You think that I have build up in my mind, through childhood associations, an erroneous notion that Trelawney House bears a grudge—if I may use so mild a word—against the Stones. Let me tell you this. It *knows* it is going to be torn down. It knows that the final revenge is mine. It is desperate, Mr. Evans. It will stop at nothing to obtain its ends."

"Fiddle faddle. A house is a house."

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"Mr. Evans, your stupidity is incredible."

"No more than your credibility is stupid, Miss Stone," Snapped John Barr Evans.

Silence closed in again and remained firmly intrenched until the car purred to a halt in front of a yellow house with brown trim and a placard in the living-room window saying, "Rooms To Let."

John Evans saw Abigail to the door, jabbed his thumb againnst the bell, stowed the luggage inside, said frigidly, "If I can be of further service, let me know," tipped his hat and left.

"Now," said John Evans to himself, "I know why pepole commit mayhem."

"Benighted fool," said Abigail Stone and bestowed a nod upon Emmy Brill who came down the stairs wiping her hands on her checkered apron.

"Thought as how I heard somebody. Bell's out of order. Gus, that's the mister, ain't gotten round to it. Right this way, Miss Stone. My, it's a gloomy day, ain't it?"

"Yes," said Abigail, "*isn't* it?"

Emmy Brill put three teaspoons of sugar in her tea and stirred it round and round.

"You're sloshing it in the saucer," Gus said.

"Let it slosh."

"Well, when *I* slosh it—"

"That's you. This is me." Emmy put the spoon in the saucer, tasted the tea and added another spoon of sugar.

"She's been here five days," Emmy said, "and Joe says it'll be another week or more before the house is down. Don't know as I can stand it."

Mr. Brill propped his feet up on the coal scuttle and sucked on his pipe. "She *is* tremendous quiet."

"It's not the quietness. I could do with a spot of quietness. It's the way she comes and goes like . . . like one of them Moslems or whatever it is that goes around fermenting revolts."

"Fomenting."

"Don't contradict me. She gets up in the morning, has her oil-egg—thank you—breakfast and is off to that house of hern. Rain or shine, off she goes."

"I should think you'd be glad to be shut of her. You wouldn't want that sourpuss hanging around here come day, go day, God send Sunday."

"That I wouldn't. But she wears on me, she does. Like today. Off she goes. And all day long I think about her and that black bombazine of hern standing around like a harpy, watching them pull that house apart. There's something . . . something spooky about it." Mrs. Brill buttered a slice of bread with sweeping backhanded strokes and took a bite, making a sizable half moon.

"Yeah. Joe says she gives him the willies." Gus teetered back on his chair legs. "He says she reminds him of a grave robber, the way she prowls around in the debris. Joe thinks maybe there's a fortune stashed away somewheres; and she's trying to get her hooks on it."

Mrs. Brill took a great draft of tea and dabbed at her mouth with a corner of her apron. "Fortune. Phooey. The Trelawneys ran through theirn and the Stones was farmers, leastways until Ezikiel Stone fell outn that window. She's just loony, that's what. Plain loony. I'll be glad when that place is tore down and she goes to Fairmount Haven—though I'll venture to say nobody at Fairmount will be glad when she gets there. They cater to old ladies, not old war horses."

"They won't have to, if she don't stay out of the way. Joe says she come so clost to being kilt tother day it sent cold chills all over him. He says a rafter come loose and would've knocked her into kingdom come, ifn she hadn't chose to sidestep promptlike."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And he said one of them chimbleys pretty near toppled over on her. He said it was the durndest thing. She was standing there talking to Joe and she looked up and this here chimbley began to fall, and she stepped quick as you please out of harm's reach and then laughed fit to beat all. Joe said he never heard such goings on outside of a hyena cage at the circus. He said it fair curled his hair. He was so taken back he stumbled over some planking and got hisself a nasty bruise for his pains."

"What was she talking to Joe about?"

"About her brother. Joe says he thinks it kind of preys on her mind. Seeing him done in like that. Can't say as I ever was taken with Jordan Stone—mealy-mouthed critter, God rest his soul—but I reckon it wouldn't set any too well if I seen him kilt. Joe says she says he stood there helplesslike, working his mouth and waving at her when the plastering come down on him."

Matter-of-factly, Emmy Brill finished her tea. She hoisted herself to her feet and padded over to the stove to wrap a crocheted holder around the teapot handle. "Them Stones—" she began, but paused with the teapot poised in her hand. She cocked her head. "Somebody's coming up the front walk," she said. "A lot of people." She replaced the teapot. "Something's happened. I feel it. I feel it in my bones." She untied her apron and smoothed her hair. "Go open the door, Gus, while I run get my shoes on. Hurry!"

Abigail Stone stood, a thin exclamation point, and scrutinized the building with grim satisfaction. Its roof was gone, one chimney was a welter of broken masonry, the west wall had been taken down and the gutted interior was exposed to view like a giant dollhouse that had been sadly abused.

Strips of wallpaper hung from the walls showing, beneath, the very ribs of the house—stained now, and bearing huge gouges where falling objects had hit and ricocheted. The gutters were at all angles and the eaves were scallops of mangled tin. The hardwood floors that once had been a tawny satin were rough and splintered and battle scarred.

There was the ghost of the kitchen stairway, a dingy row of rising zigzags on the torn and splotchy paper. There was her bedroom, a rook's nest of laths and rubbish. There was Jordan's room, what was left of it, and there was her father's room. The room in which he had sat the day Julie Trelawney died. Sat with his hands hanging flaccidly between his knees, and that dreadful, dried-up, squeezed-out look about him.

Abigail Stone drew her cloak closer around her scrawny neck and licked her bloodless lips.

She had repaid—in some measure—the cause of that look. It would be meet and just to stand in that room and say aloud, "With this house dies the last vestige of the Trelawneys." There really was no reason why she shouldn't. The stairway still curved upward, and there was no roof to fall on her, no rafters. The walls had been shored and wooden props held the ceiling firmly in position. It wouldn't spew out from beneath her feet.

The house was resigned. There was no more life in it. There was a dull, leaden deadness to it. Its power was gone. It had been three days since any "accidents." It was a hulk. A beaten, lifeless hulk.

Yes, it would be meet and just.

Abigail Stone watched the group of men stacking lumber and heaving brickbrats into the dilapidated truck.

She crossed over, stepped beyond the doorsill and drifted to the stairway noting, with a pleased smirk, their scuffed and draggled rounds, their drunken banisters.

It was on these steps that she had heard her sister scream as she fell head foremost down the cellar stairs, and it was down these steps that she had raced the day her father had met death from an attic window. It was here that she had found her mother squatting in a heap, mumbling over her fingers and drooling gibberish. And on these steps she had stood stricken dumb and seen Jordan go down under a ton of plaster. These steps.

She went on up and stopped at the top, panting a little, the wind whipping her skirts about her legs, and blowing stringy tendrils of hair from under her hat.

How strange it was up here. Open and free, the sky like a gray, wet canvas, the walls jagged Vs, as if they had been hacked away by a mammoth pinking shears. She stepped over a pile of rubble. Lonely it was. Empty. Frightening, somehow. She hadn't expected it to be like this.

She walked on, her skirts raising puffs of dust, her footsteps hollow and muffled. She caught herself listening. Silly. What was there to listen for. Where was her father's room? Queer, how unearthly everything looked in the watery half-light. There was an infinitesimal sound in a doorway she had just passed.

She whirled. A man crossed the threshold. He wore a fawn waistcoat and tight, cream-colored trousers strapped under his boots.

Instinctively she backed away. "Who are you?"

"Harvey Trelawney."

"Nonsense. Harvey Trelawney died in 1769. It's written on the slab in the churchyard."

"I am his wife," said a voice to the right. Abigail jerked her head round.

"Mary Ellen Trelawney," said the woman. She clasped a jet bag in her mittened hands and around her shoulders was a fringed shawl.

"I am Martin." A man stepped through one of the walls.

"And I am Lucius." A youth in his early twenties appeared by a hole in a partition. "I was killed in 1916. Verdun."

"I am Sarah."

"I am Robert."

"I am Ann Marie. I was born here during the war between the States."

"I am Evelyn."

"I am Stanley."

Abigail thrust her hands before her, as if to ward them off and step by step inched backward along the way she had come.

"No," she cried, her voice unrecognizable. "No!

Pepsi-Cola is made only by Pepsi-Cola Company, Long Island City, N. Y. Bottled locally by authorized bottlers.

No! You're dead. All of you."

"I am Julie," breathed a soft voice down the back of her neck. "They say I died of Spanish influenza. I didn't. I was Stoned to death."

The others laughed uproariously.

Abigail Stone pivoted on her heel and with terror-distorted pupils stared with dawning recognition at the trim figure confronting her. The dancing curls, the bee-stung mouth, the froth of lace at the white throat, the band of velvet ribbon encircling the tiny wrist. The violet eyes. Those awful violet eyes. How bright they were. How alive. And pierced with flickering flames. They despised her. They—they— Abigail threw a frenzied glance at the faces crowding in on her. They all despised her. They hated her. They were so silent. So remorseless, threatening, horrible in their relentless observation of her. They hated her. Hated her.

"No!" screamed Abigail. "No, no, no." She ran blindly for the nearest door, her heart throbbing in her breast, her head swimming crazily.

A girl slouched in the door blocking her path. Her neck was twisted to one side and her mouth was awry. Her clothing was begrimed with dirt and blood.

Abigail recoiled in horror. "Eloise!"

"You can't escape," said Eloise.

Gathering up her skirts, Abigail veered away and ran on, the pattering of many feet ringing in her ears. Her sleeves caught and she wheeled to free herself.

"You can't escape," said the man plucking at her sleeves. His features were a smashed blob, and his skull was laid wide. One of his eyes had burst and streamed out of its socket.

"Father!" she shrieked. "Father!"

"You can't escape," he said.

She tore her sleeve loose from his fingers and darted into a room.

She almost fell over a white iron bedstead with claw feet. The woman in the bed stirred, with an effort she sat up. Her arms were folded one upon the other and laced tightly in a strait jacket. She twitched spasmodically and babbled unintelligibly at Abigail, her eyes rolling in her shaven head, bubbles of spittle collecting at the corners of her lax mouth.

Abigail's voice was a thin thread of fear. "God help me," she sobbed, but the wind pulled the words from lips and smothered them with an eerie, long-drawn wail that seemed to come from a hundred invisible throats. An exultant Valkyrian yell. They began to pour through the walls.

"I am Sylvia."

"I am Anderson."

"I am Thomas."

"He-he-he-he-he-he," laughed the woman in the straight jacket and the others took up the imbecilic mirth—"he-he-he-he-he-he-he-he-he-he."

The stairway, if only she could find the stairway. Where was it? Dear God, the stairway.

Hands tripped her feet and clutched at her gown.

The stairway, please, God, the stairway. There!

She stopped short. Below in the great hall stood a man, his face upturned, his mouth working convulsively, as if he were trying to call something to her and couldn't. He gestured at her wildly. The wind lifted a lock of hair to disclose an ugly bruise on his temple. The odor of tuberoses and calla lilies arose thick in her nostrils.

"Jordan!"

"He-he-he-he-he-he-he-he-he-he-he."

Unseen hands caught her from behind and rushed her forward.

"He-he-he-he-he-he-he-he-he-he-he."

"Help! Hel—"

Emmy Brill, breathless and flustered, shooed the crowd outside. She stationed a small Brill beside the front door with the stern admonition that he was to let nobody in but Mr. Evans, the doctor and the undertaker.

To the small Brill's piping advice that they wouldn't need nobody *but* the undertaker she had replied with a stinging box on the ears and the promise of another if he didn't follow orders.

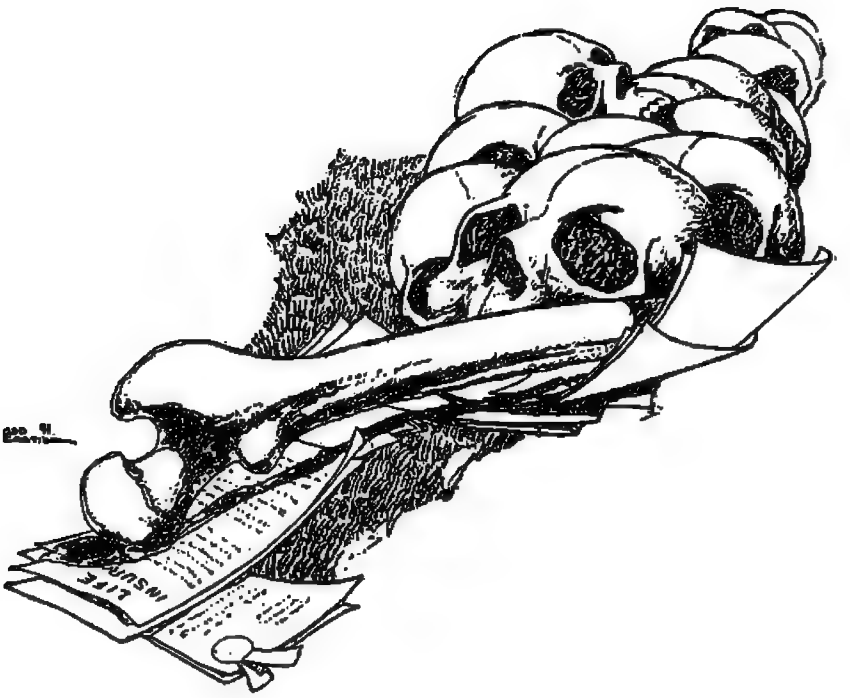
She closed the door and went into the parlor. Don't think about what's upstairs in Abigail Stone's room, she told herself, don't *think* about it. It's covered up with a sheet. Think about the sheet. Don't think about what's under it.

Joe Brill sat on the horsehair sofa, his face in his hands.

"I knew it was going to happen," he said. His voice was toneless. "I seen her flying around upstairs like crazy and I run quick as I could. She had got to the head of the stairs just as I come in. I tried to call to her, but I couldn't. I waved. I *tried* to wave her back. I near waved my arms off. She screamed something at me, I couldn't make out what. And then . . . then . . . she . . . she . . . plunged down . . . and—"

"There, there," soothed Emmy Brill. "It wasn't your fault a bit. She had eyes in her head, didn't she? Now don't you get yourself all riled. I'll fix you a nice sheet—I mean cup of hot tea and you'll feel better. That you will. Gus, just you go out and warm up that tea. And, while you're waiting, run upstairs and get that bottle of liniment—I'll put some on this bruise Joe's got on his forehead. There now . . . there—"

THE END.



"WITH A BLUNT INSTRUMENT"

By Eric Frank Russell

It was a perfectly safe little way of cheating the insurance companies. Just murder a well-insured man with the aid of a certain peculiar "blunt instrument"—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

Mrs. Banstead squatted like an immense bull-frog, stared grimly across the big black desk and said, "I want to be a widow."

"Really!" Digger Kelly registered interest by raising a sardonic eyebrow. His face was long and leathery, his eyes cold, blue and shrewd, his grin both hard and mirthless. "How much is he carrying?"

"Five thousand dollars." Her broad, flat face quirked at mention of the sum. "I've been paying for seven years, and if something isn't done damn quick, I'll go on paying for another forty. I'd rather have his money than his company."

"I'm sure you would." Again the grin. "You have my sincere sympathy." He watched her speculatively. She stared back at him with the blatant, unwinking gaze of a fat basilisk. "You know my terms—fifty-fifty?" She nodded. "And what leads you to suppose that I can—er—be of assistance to you in this respect?"

"You were recommended," she told him, her voice a hoarse monotone, "by my sister, Melissa Gates."

"Ah!" Opening a drawer, Kelly raked through a file, extracted some papers. He studied them in silence, then, "Yes, Mrs. Gates provided my sixteenth case. A very successful one, even though I say so myself. Nice and smooth and satisfactory in every way. I attended the burial." Carefully he replaced the papers.

"Aren't you risking a length of hemp with those documents around?" Mrs. Banstead's devilish

tranquillity was disturbed. Her great, repulsive bosom heaved with her breathing.

"No." He grinned at her again, his cold eyes running over her bulging shapelessness. Two hundred fifty pounds, he guessed—she wouldn't need more than seven feet of rope. "They record nothing of use to anyone but me."

They didn't either. Not even Dan Fletcher could use them effectively, supposing that he'd get his long, thin, inquisitive fingers on them. Dan Fletcher needed watching all the same. Better keep strictly to his plan of doing twenty-five before skipping. Twenty-five was risk enough in a town this size. In fact, twenty-five came dangerously close to inserting a curious factor in Fletcher's infernal mathematics. Fletcher played with numbers like a maestro fingering the strings of a harp, and he was liable to start tuning up immediately he sensed a discord.

"The sum you have mentioned, Mrs. Banstead," he said smoothly, "is low, very low. I must tell you frankly that I'm hardly enamored of the proposition." Inserting strong strangler's thumbs in the armholes of his vest, he pursed his lips doubtfully.

She said, in a funereal monotone, "I'm paying rates upped twenty percent. It buys me a clause: I get twelve thousand if the hairy louse goes before the age of forty-eight."

"Of natural causes, of course?" hazarded Kelly.

"Of natural causes," she confirmed.

"That makes a considerable difference." Extracting a thumb, he pressed a stud on the ebony desk. A dwarf answered. The dwarf was squat, pot-bellied, black-skinned, and he wore a suit of sloppy clothes as if reluctantly conforming to an insane custom. "This," said Kelly, "is Mrs. Banstead, our latest client."

The dwarf emitted a piglike grunt, glowered at her with sullen eyes. There was something weirdly fundamental about him, something totally out of place—like a Hottentot in a penthouse. Mrs. Banstead vaguely wondered if the creature *was* a Hottentot. He was animal, and she could smell him from where she sat, a pungent, goatish smell. She didn't like him.

Kelly gabbled at the dwarf in a strange language composed of snorts and grunts. The dwarf went out.

"The matter will be dealt with," said Kelly. He stood up, his long, wiry figure topping six feet. His manner indicated that the interview was at an end.

"But—"

"The agreement between us," he responded, sensing her question, "remains unwritten. In due time you will pay me." He leaned across the desk, smiled with the air of a businessman who has just pulled a satisfactory deal, then said, very slowly and very deliberately, "God help you if you don't!"

Mrs. Banstead heaved her great form erect. Now that it was all arranged, she felt shaken. But Melissa had got away with it, so why shouldn't she? Besides, this hex doctor fairly radiated confidence. She calmed herself as she walked ponderously to the door.

With her hand on the handle, she asked, "When . . . when will it be?"

"In six to eight weeks' time." Kelly sat down again, frowned like a busy man bothered by superfluous questions. "The twenty-fifth," he murmured after she had gone. His hard eyes bored at the wall. "Providing Fletcher suspects nothing, I can get out and start again elsewhere. Damn Fletcher!" He continued to stare at the wall for some time. Then he rang the bell, and the dwarf came back.

"Charlie," he said, "I've got a job for you." He lapsed into a torrent of outlandish gutturals. The dwarf listened without emotion, grunting occasionally.

Mason sighed resignedly, suppressed a yawn, and said, "You may be right and you may be wrong. I wouldn't know. But if you ask me, I'd say you've either got a nasty mind, or else you place too much faith in statistics. You're mathematics mad!"

"Did you ever hear," demanded Dan Fletcher, "of any insurance company that didn't do business upon a statistical basis?" He didn't wait for a reply. His clenched fist landed with a thump on Mason's desk, and a gob of that worthy's ink leaped from the pot and made an unsightly splash. "No," he said emphatically.

Finding the blotter, Mason dabbed gloomily at the smear and said, "I see no cause to start a smelling out of witches just because there's a peak in the graph. I've seen dozens of graphs in my time, and most of them had peaks. They get dragged down to average by equally periodic dips." He put away the blotter, eyed Fletcher's fist, cautiously closed the lid of the inkpot. "Sinkers compensate for soarers if you wait long enough for nature to take its course. So relax, be soothed. Peace be upon you."

"Twenty-four," persisted Dan Fletcher irefully. "Twenty-four policies that are stinkers. Either someone has blundered or we've been made suckers." Finding a chair, he planted his broad beam upon it, his legs braced as if to bring him upright in a flash. His bold gaze examined Mason until that person began to fidget. "Ever seen our statistical morgue at head office?"

"Can't say that I have," admitted the other reluctantly.

"Go up and see it sometime," invited Fletcher. "It holds thousands upon thousands of records

going back for a hundred and forty years. It is a mathematical whiz. Given certain of the necessary details and applying them to our mathematical data, I could tell you your expectation of life correctly to within two years. What's more, I could also give you decimal-pointed percentages covering possibilities of intervention by accidents of any imaginable kind." He got up, walked around restlessly. "As you well know—or ought to—policies aren't based on guesswork. They're based on data that doesn't cover and can't cover freak events and rare epidemics, but are good enough to eliminate the possibility of twenty-four stinkers in a row."

"I know you're the company's official trouble-shooter," said Mason feebly, "but how in hell can you shoot the peak off a graph? If twenty-four geeziks pop off fifteen to thirty years too early, and if twenty-four reputable medicos swear that their days had properly dawned, what can you do about it? Can you order a couple of dozen exhumations on the strength of a statistical flaw?"

"A grand total of three hundred thousand smackers is more than a statistical flaw."

"Yes, but all the deaths were natural. If a couple of them had been done in with the usual blunt instrument, I'd be leery myself. But when you get clean certificates, what else can you do but pay up with a smile and hold your trap?"

"You can mooch around," said Dan Fletcher darkly. He caught Mason napping, walloped a spurt of ink from the other pot which had been left open. "*I'm* going to mooch around. Something smells, and I'm going to find it."

This was the house. The sixteenth down Dan's list; he'd picked it at random—one had to start somewhere if one were going to get anywhere. Running his finger down the list, he checked up on the name: Mrs. Maisie Curtin. The board in the foyer said she nested on the fifth floor.

Using the elevator, Dan Fletcher slipped the operator a five-spot and said, "This Curtin woman—can you give me a brief resumé of her life?"

"A floozie." The operator magiced the note away, gave Fletcher a respectful look. "Her old man kicked the bucket about six months back, and she collected plenty on him. Did she weep for him—hah!" His sniff was loud and contemptuous. "Her and Curtin never got along. He liked books and things. She was fond of bingo, boys and booze. Now she's setting the pace."

"Making the play, eh?"

"I'll say!" The elevator stopped with a rubbery bounce. "Curtin never did anybody any harm, and he was mighty good to me." He opened the gate, let Fletcher out. "But he faded away. I watched him sinking week after week. Then he died." He struck his head out and added. "Second on the left, and thanks, mister!"

Dan Fletcher thumbed the button on the door indicated. Short, swift steps sounded the other side, and the woman who opened the door was very small, very blond, with wide blue eyes. She was well rounded, well lipsticked, and made a fair job of looking like a foolish virgin.

"If you're selling something," she said in a babyish voice, "you can damn well—oh!" Her voice changed as her blue eyes took in Dan's craggy features, broad, trim figure, and neatly pressed suit. The eyes became interested and calculating. "Come in," she invited, standing aside.

He entered, his hat in his hand. "Mrs. Curtin?" he asked. She nodded, still weighing him up speculatively. "My name's Dan Fletcher."

"It's a pleasure," she said. She studied him like a housewife about to buy a hunk of beef. "Won't you be seated—er—Mr. Fletcher?" He sat, stared around the room. It was a picture of garish opulence. Mrs. Curtin opened a cocktail cabinet, found a flask and two glasses. "Like a drink?" She eyed him again, deliberately coy.

"No, thanks, Mrs. Curtin." He noted that she had not yet asked his business. Watching her carefully, he added, "I've come around from the Atlantic & General Assurance Co."

She didn't drop a glass, but he saw her knuckles whiten as her grip closed, and he did not miss the sudden, unfathomable expression that sprang into her eyes. Was it fear, or what?

"Indeed," she murmured after a long silence. Her interest in him seemed to have changed suddenly. Putting down the flask and the glasses, she played around with her hands as if she didn't quite know what to do with them. Her eyes were on him all the time.

He let her get on with it, curious to see how she'd make the conversation. She fidgeted a bit more, then reclaimed one of the glasses and poured herself a drink. It was a stiff one, Fletcher noted, a good, full-sized sea dog's snifter, and she poured it into her baby face as if it were far from being the first and equally far from being the last.

The drink crawled around her innards and did things to her, including a reddening of her face. "Go on," she ordered, tipping another into the glass.

"It's about the policy on your late husband, Robert Curtin," Fletcher went on cautiously.

Downing the second one, she stood up and said, "What of it?" Her voice had altered now—it was harsh and slightly bellicose.

"The company," lied Fletcher, "is associated with the Eastern Investment Corp., whom I represent. Frankly, for the sake of good will and hope of further business, we are prepared to offer excellent advice and undertake financial dealings on behalf of clients who have—"

"Oh," she interrupted, "so you're after my twenty-five thousand bucks." She smacked down

the glass, jammed small fists on prominent hips, and glared. "No soap—get out!"

"Very well, Mrs. Curtin." With a resigned sigh, Dan Fletcher found his hat. "You will understand, I hope, that we waited a decent time before approaching you, that we've no desire to bother you unduly, and that we only wish to retain the good will of clients."

"When I get a load of money," she told him, "I know what to do with it. You're wasting your time, mister. Now scram!"

Pausing by the door, he surveyed her again, then said, "The assistance that we are always glad to give may not interest you, Mrs. Curtin, but possibly it may be welcome to others whom you can recommend. In such cases we would, of course, follow the usual practice of paying you—er—a commission on any business you introduce."

"Well," she responded thoughtfully. The angry light died slowly from her eyes. "If there's any more to be got, I guess I can use it." She thought awhile, then stared him in the face. "You won't get a damn cent of mine, see? But if this commission stunt of yours is on the up and up, I reckon I can give you a couple of names."

"Thank you, Mrs. Curtin," he answered with deceitful humility. "Our integrity is above reproach."

"It'd better be!" She scribbled a note, gave it to him. He saw her reaching for the glass again as he went out.

Downstairs, he looked at the note. It bore three names and addresses. Then he looked at his list, found the three among the twenty-four thereon, carefully put a tick against each.

"Now how," he asked himself, "in the name of all that's holy, does it come about that one of the queers knows three of the others?" Then he phoned Mason.

Melissa Gates was of a very different type from the Curtin woman, red-haired, peaky-faced, shrewish. If features betrayed character, hers was nosy and suspicious.

"Who sent you round?" she asked.

"Mrs. Curtin," Dan Fletcher told her. "She thought you might be interested."

"Oh, she did, did she?" She rubbed thin, blue-lined hands on her pinafore, sniffed audibly. "What's she getting out of it?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand you, Mrs. Gates."

"Never mind. I know her, and she knows me. That woman wouldn't buy anything outside of a bottle and maybe a perm for her peroxided mop. If I was to tell you—" She checked herself, sniffed again, and said, "All right, say what you've got to say."

"I thought you and Mrs. Curtin were friends," prompted Fletcher.

"So we are, but that doesn't alter my opinion of her." She sat down, peered at her visitor with ratlike eyes. "Did she let you invest her money?"

"As a matter of fact, she didn't."

"I guessed not. She'll play it around until she hooks a good one. Then she'll bury him for plenty. Never satisfied, that's her! One of these days she'll—" She checked herself again, seeing the look on Dan Fletcher's face. Hurriedly she added, "Maisie Curtin's the sort who goes after wealthy old men."

"I see," said Fletcher doubtfully.

"Anyway, I've hung on to my dough," continued Melissa Gates, sniffing her satisfaction. She pursed thin lips, stared at him beadily, like a rodent peering round the bend of a sewer. "And I'm still sticking to it. Twelve grand's a lot of money, more'n I ever had before. Some day I may need it—quick!" She emitted a shrill cackle. "That's where some of them'll be mighty sorry they poured it down the sink."

"Who'll be mighty sorry?" Dan Fletcher thrust.

"Why . . . why"—she searched for words, suddenly wary—"those who throw dough away and live to regret it."

"The preventing of which is precisely my business."

She went to the door, her wariness and suspicion strengthening to the verge of alarm. She licked thin lips as she looked at him, her shifty eyes silently cursing her ready tongue.

"Sorry you've wasted your time." Opening the door, she waited for him to go.

Outside the door he took a long shot and said easily, "Ah, well, there's always the—er—others. Mrs. Curtin also recommended a Mrs. Schultze. Do you think she's a likely prospect?"

"Maisie's a loudmouth," snapped Mrs. Gates positively. "And Lucy Shultze is a screwball. Go pound your dogs and find out. It's no business of mine." With that she slammed the door.

Dan Fletcher went down the block and round the corner. He consulted his list once more. The name of Lucy Schultze, which he'd raked from his memory, stood fourth from the bottom.

"Now," he muttered, his brow corrugated with a frown, "that Curtin dame definitely did *not* mention Schultze. Yet Gates knew her, called her Lucy, and acted as if Curtin knew her also." He tipped his hat on the back of his head. "The way things are shaping, it looks like the whole damn bunch know one another."

Entering a telephone booth, he dialed a number. "That the Bodin Agency? This is Fletcher of the A & G. I want a couple of good operatives to help me dig out some routine data. What've you got in stock that can third-degree with tact and gentlemanly seemliness?" He grinned as the other voice gabbled back at him. "Yes, at once. I'll wait for them here." Giving the location, he

pronged the receiver. Then he strolled to the curb, lit a cigarette and waited.

Banstead was a muscle-bound individual with a barrel chest, broad jowls, and big arms lush with black hair. Once he'd been a logger up in Canada, but now was bidding fair to end his days as a loud noise in wholesale timber. Another twenty years might do it.

There had been a few tough episodes in his horny-handed past, enough of them to make him feel well able to take care of himself. He wasn't superstitious. He'd walk under ladders, stare at the new moon or spill salt without a single qualm. Nevertheless, he didn't like the pair of guys at the next table. They gave him the creeps.

The big café was half full, and the offending pair particularly prominent. A subtle something about their manner suggested less interest in food than in Banstead. He'd never seen either of them before, had no yearning ever to see either of them again.

One of the pair was a tall, lean, athletic guy with the hard, tanned complexion of a roughrider. Only his eyes were abnormal: they were more intent and colder than a snake's.

The other resembled nothing that Banstead had ever seen. He was a black-skinned dwarf, wrinkled, slightly pot-bellied and had the sharp, uneasy eyes of a nervous monkey. His clothes looked like they'd been thrown at him and stuck where they touched.

A more ill-assorted pair it would be impossible to conceive, but there they were, in company, an elusive bond of union between them. Banstead could sense this bond, and instinctively felt that he should be able to identify it. But he couldn't. The tall guy, he reckoned, was not an American, and his companion was not a Negro. These two negatives ought to make a positive, but the quietly observing Banstead didn't know enough about racial types to put a finger on this pair.

Stolidly he dug into his hunk of pie. The tall cowboy was too slick to watch him openly, but the other was glaring at him as if at long last he'd tracked down the infidel who'd stolen the green eye of his little yellow god. There was an eerie quality in that glare, a quality that was neither animosity nor downright hatred, but rather vague and fundamental—like a primitive threat from the dawn of time.

Finishing, Banstead got up, made his way out. He favored the dwarf with a stare of challenge as he passed, got in return a fierce, unwavering gaze that caused tickling sensations in the region of his kidneys. For two pins the black runt would carve him apart.

"A returned explorer and an uncaged cannibal," Banstead hazarded as he got outside.

Glancing back through the plate-glass windows at the brightly illuminated interior, he saw the weird couple leave their seats. He summoned a taxi, watched the rear-view mirror as the machine purred down the street. The mysterious pair came out of the café, took a yellow-top and followed. He scowled to himself, directed his driver around the block, lost the shadowing machine, but was still vaguely suspicious.

The two had not reappeared by the time he got near home, and already he was accusing himself of giving way to his nerves. In the nighttime gloom, here was an empty yellow-top standing around the corner two hundred yards from his destination, but he gave it no more than a glance. A big green automobile was waiting farther down the street, and he studied that with greater interest, since it was parked outside the entrance to the long drive leading to his house. A broad-shouldered, well-dressed individual was lounging near the green car as Banstead came up.

Getting out of his taxi, Banstead paid the driver, gazed belligerently at the waiting onlooker, started up the path. Swift footsteps came after him; he whirled to face his pursuer, his bulldog jaw sticking out pugnaciously. It was the broad-shouldered man.

In a pleasant voice, the other said, "Mr. Banstead, I believe?"

"Correct."

"I just missed you at your office and had to catch you here. My name's Fletcher, Dan Fletcher. I represent the Atlantic & General Assurance Co."

"I'm not interested," said Banstead curtly. "Moreover, I'm a busy man and haven't time to discuss taking out a policy even if I had the inclination—which I haven't." He jerked his head to indicate the thin edge of the moon now riding high. "This is a hell of a time to go chasing prospects."

"I'm not out to sell you anything," replied Dan Fletcher evenly. His keen eyes noted the underlying toughness of Banstead's features. "All I want is a brief talk with you, in private, about a very delicate matter."

"Ho!" scoffed Banstead derisively. "I know that gag. It's in those courses on supersalesmanship you get by mail. Method No. 4. The approach oblique."

"All right," retorted Fletcher quietly. "Have it your own way. What I'm out to do is to prevent crime and save money. I don't like the notion of dishing out several thousand smackers across your dead body."

"No," agreed Banstead. "I'll bet you don't!" His laugh was a deep rumble as he turned and walked away. On the third step his advancing foot stopped, he came swiftly about and snapped. "What? What was that you just said?"

"I'll explain in private, and that doesn't mean out here in the open."

Banstead looked around. The trees along the gloomy drive rustled sibilantly and ragged clouds drifted across the moon. His wife, her yapping mother, two maids, the cook, and probably the shrewish Melissa Gates would be snooping around the house. But he wasn't going back to town at this time of night.

"I'll give you ten minutes in your car," he decided, "and you'd better make it interesting."

Dan Fletcher hesitated. "O. K." They got in. Banstead settled himself comfortably in a corner. Fletcher brought out his papers and proceeded to explain.

"So after that, with the help of some Bodin operatives, I discovered that all the people on this list know some of the other people on it, and that there is a traceable link from one to the other. There are three cases not listed, which occur within the same period, but since they do not link with any of these, and especially since they conform to the mathematical data for such a period, I accept them as genuine claims. But these on the list are not genuine."

"You're trying to invent trouble," pooh-poohed Banstead. "Graphs and figures can be made to mean anything. Besides, where do I come in? I'm not on that list of yours. D'you think I've bumped the lot?"

"If you'll give me time, I'll explain where you come in," said Fletcher. "After I'd obtained this data, and analyzed it, I took the next logical step."

"What was that?"

"I extracted all local policies still open for considerable sums and, with the help of the operatives, tried to extend the links. Of seventeen policyholders, I found only one having a connection with people on this list." He looked the other straight in the eyes. "That one was Mrs. Banstead."

"What, Josephine?" He laughed harshly. "Scheming to collect on me? That fat frump wouldn't have the guts!"

"So that's how it is," thought Fletcher, his confidence rising considerably. Bluntly, he said to his sardonically amused listener, "I'll admit I'm only following my nose, but if figures mean anything—and I believe that they do—they mean you're likely to kick the bucket before long. If you do, I'd like to learn how it's brought about, but if you keep your wits working you may prove me wrong."

Heaving himself out of the car, Banstead rumbled, "Many thanks for the tip, but I think you're nutty. You've a score of doctors against you on your own admission."

"That's just the hell of it. Somebody's invented what looks like the perfect crime, and I want to prove that it isn't."

"Well," joked Banstead, "see you when I'm dying!"

Then his burly figure faded into the darkness of the drive. The screen of trees on either side thickened the gloom about the path, and the blackness swallowed him like a hungry maw.

As his feet crunched steadily nearer and nearer to the house, a tall, lean man waiting in the thick shadow of an outhouse nudged a small, black figure glowering at his side. The black one dragged something white from his pocket, turned his back toward the oncoming walker in the night.

At the wheel of his car the disgruntled Fletcher stared up the silent road and murmured, "Curse it! If only he'd been the jumpy sort. If only he'd been willing to collaborate, we might have gotten somewhere." He pondered sullenly for a while, then his foot moved toward the starter.

A voice somewhere up by the house called in loud and angry tones. Then a moment of silence, while slowly, dismally, the crescent moon swam through cloudy seas. Another call, louder, angrier, followed by a shot. Two more shots. Finally a fourth. They were thunderous in the quiet of night.

Dan Fletcher was out of the car and into the dark drive before the echoes of the last explosion had died away. Ahead of him, somebody, or something, started squealing like a stabbed hog. Lights sprang up all over the distant house as the squeals rose crescendo. It was a long, thin, horrid sound that split the night and wailed up to the wan stars.

A body was crashing through the undergrowth to his left, moving with all the mad abandon of a demented elephant. With lightning speed, his mind decided that flight meant guilt and he plunged that way, his arms pumping at his sides as he hurled his big body along.

He followed entirely by sound, catching first glimpse of his quarry when a lean, lithe figure gracefully vaulted the fence and reached the road. Way back, the eerie screams had changed to a sobbing howl that was slowly dying. The fugitive was a mere ten yards ahead, but going fast, so fast that even the speedy Fletcher could not gain on him by so much as an inch. The fellow seemed completely unaware of one so close upon his heels.

There was a yellow-top waiting around the corner. The fugitive dived into it, bellowed at the dozing driver, saw Fletcher for the first time. Sticking an arm out of the window, he fired at the pounding Fletcher from a range of three yards and missed. His hand was still shaking after the exertion of his wild flight, and his bullet whipped Fletcher's hat from his head.

"Hey!" yelped the taxi driver, suddenly awake.

"You—" growled Fletcher.

He was up to the cab by now and his big hand darted out and seized the wrist behind the menacing gun. Vigorously, Fletcher jerked the wrist upward as the weapon exploded again. The heavy bullet whipped through the treetops and a couple of stricken leaves came floating down.

Still holding the wrist, Fletcher heaved its owner clean out of the cab. At first the other resisted, then suddenly responded to the heave with pantherish agility that almost put Fletcher on the ground.

Caught off-balance, Fletcher retained his steely grasp upon the wrist, fastened his other hand upon his snarling opponent's jacket, toppled and went down, dragging the fugitive with him. In grim silence broken only by their panting breaths the two rolled on the sidewalk, fighting furiously.

Desperately, the mystery man clung to his gun. With equal determination, Fletcher struggled to maintain his hold upon the wrist. His free arm moved in pistonlike jabs to the other's midriff. The cold, hard grin remained fixed upon his opponent's leathery face even as his blows rammed home. Yipping with excitement, the taxi driver danced around their violently writhing forms.

Then, with a ferocious pull, the fugitive ripped his gun hand free, slashed Fletcher across the face with the barrel. The blow was agonizing in the extreme. In Fletcher's brief moment of pain-racked blindness, the other dexterously tossed his weapon into reverse, grasped the barrel, swung the thing like a club.

Down it came, butt first. Fletcher flung up a warding hand, caught the heel plate on the base of his palm. Involuntarily, his shocked fingers curled around the butt and the gun went off. The fugitive slowly arose and emitted an ecstatic gasp like a convert arising from baptism, then flopped sidewise. The hole in his chest was as big as a fist.

"Gawd!" jittered the driver. "You've killed him!"

His head throbbing as if about to burst, and a line of fire pulsating across his face, Fletcher had a closer look at the victim. A long, lanky, hard-bitten specimen, this. Even the ghostly moonlight could not soften these icy features which Fletcher could not remember having seen before.

Then he recalled the strange howls up near the house, snapped to the wide-eyed driver, "Go fetch the police," and raced back toward the drive.

Although he was dying, Banstead could talk. Even on his deathbed his old-time roughness remained defiantly in evidence. There was a huge, shapeless, surly woman by his bed, also a white-haired crone with querulous and watery eyes. The old dame's expression was a mixture of curiosity and fright; the big woman's one of callousness peculiarly undershot with disappointment and alarm.

"Beat it, ma. Clear out, Josephine," ordered Banstead. He followed them with a hard stare until they had gone. Then he turned his attention to Fletcher. "They've phoned for the doctor.

He'll be no damned good! I know I'm dying." He was quite phlegmatic about it. "Somehow you can tell."

"We'll see what he has to say before we give you up," offered Fletcher optimistically.

"I reckon this plays hell with your crackpot theory, eh?" Banstead grinned lugubriously. "You didn't say anything about strong-arm stuff. I was supposed to pine away gradually."

"Tell me what happened," Fletcher suggested. "But don't talk too much if the effort pulls you down."

"I'm O. K. I'll see the dawn, anyway." He licked his lips, winced. "I was at the top of the drive, about to take a short cut across the circle of lawn before the door, when I heard a sort of eerie, subdued gabbling to my left. Looking that way, I saw a black dwarf standing on the edge of the moonlight. He had his back turned to me and was jerking something white over his shoulder, pointing it at me and voicing his mumbo jumbo in guttural undertones."

"And then?"

"I bawled, 'What the hell's going on there?' but he took not the slightest notice, went on with his pointing and his gabbling." Banstead's pupils shrank to pin points as he looked at his listener. "Mister, I'm no sucker for abracadabra, but what he was doing sent a parade of little frogs hopping up my spine. Every time that white thing flipped over his shoulder I could feel their feet, cold, colder than the grave."

"So what did you do?"

"I had a gun, a baby automatic. I've carried it for years, ever since—well, never mind. So I took it out and yelled, 'Come out of there or I'll shoot!' The dwarf took not a damn bit of notice. I doubt whether he understood what I was saying. Anyway, I fired without further argument, sending a slug an inch over his pate." He stopped, bit his bottom lip, shoved his hairy hands down under the covers and nursed his middle.

"There was another guy standing in the deeper shadows. I didn't know that! He drew a bead on me and let me have it right in the guts. He knew where to toss his metal, all right! I went down like a poled steer. The dwarf had now realized that this was no kissing competition, he'd dropped on all fours and was scuttling for the dark parts like a frightened baboon. The moonlight sort of silhouetted his distorted form, and I plonked two pills into his dirty belly before I passed out."

"He's dead," informed Fletcher. "I found his body sprawled at the edge of the lawn. And the guy who plugged you is also cold." He told Banstead what had happened.

"Good," exclaimed Banstead, with painful satisfaction. His eyes were being sapped of gloss and hardness, gradually growing bleary. "Wish Old Man Carver would hurry up." His pain momentarily faded, and his interest returned. "Say, what the devil was the thing with which that dwarf was capering?"

"This." Fletcher held it up. "It was still in his hand."

"A bone!"

"Yes, just a polished bone. Looks to me like a human thighbone."

"Bah!" Banstead was frankly contemptuous. "Hex stuff! I still think your theory's crazy!"

A violent hammering shook the panels of the front door and Fletcher said, "Here's the doc at last."

"No, the police." Banstead's quiet smile was lopsided. "They're the only ones who think the whole world is stone deaf."

Mason leaned right back in his seat, put big feet on his desk, and said, "Trouble-shooter, eh? There's been more darned trouble since you turned up in this neck of the woods than I've ever known before."

"Such as what?" Dan Fletcher helped himself to a cigarette from Mason's cut-glass box.

"You come around smelling a murder ring. You get Bodin's gang on the hop at our expense. You scare hell out of two dozen policyholders and sit by the deathbed of an insured subject. You've some sort of a finger in a couple of killings and bring the police down on me with a lot of nutty questions."

"Is that all?" asked Fletcher gently.

"No it ain't—isn't. Not by a long shot. You beat it back to headquarters and stay there three weeks, leaving me hanging in midair." Mason's face was decidedly sour. "Meanwhile, half a dozen crazy claimants return their payments in full and four more return them in part, promising the rest later. Three doctors have been around pestering me about hypochondriacs with obsessions concerning this outfit." His stare was accusing. "Strange as it may seem—and believe it or not—they say their customers are fading away with a purely imaginary hex stuck on them by the Atlantic & General Assurance Co., and that we've got to make 'em imagine we've taken it off." His face full of disgust, he spat into the fire.

"You can tell those doctors to inform their patients that their own consciences are killing them." Fletcher dragged a couple of objects from his pocket, put them on the desk.

"Bones!" The embittered Mason stared glassily, his color rising. "Now he makes the place a charnal house!"

"The one on the left," said Fletcher carefully,

"is a genuine Australian death bone." He stabbed Mason with his glance. "It works!"

"Huh?"

"Don't ask me how it works because I don't know—and neither does anyone else I've been able to consult in the last three weeks. All I've been able to get is some cabled data on the way it's used. You hold the knuckle end, turn your back to the victim, point the splintered end over your shoulder at him, exert the right force, spit the proper curses, and he pines away."

"As if!" said Mason, wiggling his feet.

"A beautiful racket," Fletcher went on. "It leaves justice impotent, since the law cannot recognize supernatural ways of killing. Until science can explain the power of the bone, the law's only verdict is death from natural causes."

"Ugh!" Mason gazed over the toes of his boots at the bone, shifted his feet away from any possible area of potency.

"The brain of this murder ring was one Edward 'Digger' Kelly, known to our central Australian office as a clever and persistent insurance pirate, and badly wanted by the Australian police. The accomplice who performed his devilment was Charlie Murra, a semicivilized Myall priest."

"And what," demanded Mason, eying the second bone, "is that other relic?"

"Oh, that?" Fletcher's grin was wide. "Just an ordinary, harmless bone I got from a butcher. Since the law cannot exercise full retribution, I've been exercising some of my own." He produced his list, tossed it onto the desk. "I've made another call on all our esteemed clients and pointed it at them."

"What?" yelped Mason. He dragged his feet off the desk and sat upright.

"They didn't like it. Five of them fainted, two had hysterics. All I said to them was six sentences of gibberish regardless of whether or not they'd passed out." His grin spread from ear to ear. "And now, according to you, they're dragging back their ill-gotten gains."

"Yeah," agreed Mason, popeyed. He thumbed a small notebook. "Eighty thousand so far."

"Guess I'd better stick to these sad remains." Nonchalantly, he put the bones in his pocket. He studied Mason, found him speculative and unwary. In a loud voice, he said, "And don't say peaks can't be shot off graphs!" His big fist came down on the desk with a hearty thump that shook the room, and the spurt from both inkpots was eminently satisfactory.

"No, Dan." Gloomily, Mason heaved himself from his seat, wandered off in search of two large sheets of blotting paper.

THE END.

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By Lester del Rey

● He was a very good man, oh, so carefully and consciously humble. When he died, naturally, he went— But where was it? Some said Heaven—some said Hell—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

Phineas Theophilus Potts, who would have been the last to admit and the first to believe he was a godly man, creaked over in bed and stuck out one scrawny arm wrathfully. The raucous jangling of the alarm was an unusually painful cancer in his soul that morning. Then his waking mind took over and he checked his hand, bringing it down on the alarm button with precise, but gentle, firmness. Would he never learn to control these little angers? In this world one should bear all troubles with uncomplaining meekness, not rebel against them; otherwise— But it was too early in the morning to think of that.

He wriggled out of bed and gave his thoughts over to the ritual of remembering yesterday's sins, checking to make sure all had been covered and wiped out the night before. That's when he got his first shock; he couldn't remember anything about the day before—bad, very bad. Well, no doubt it was another trap of the forces conspiring to secure Pott's soul. *Tch, tch.* Terrible, but he could circumvent even that snare.

There was no mere mumbling by habit to his confession; word after word rolled off his tongue carefully with full knowledge and unctuous shame until he reached the concluding lines. "For the manifold sins which I have committed and for this greater sin which now afflicts me, forgive and guide me to sin no more, but preserve me in righteousness all the days of my life. Amen." Thus

having avoided the pitfall and saved himself again from eternal combustion, he scrubbed hands with himself and began climbing into his scratchy underclothes and cheap black suit. Then he indulged in a breakfast of dry toast and buttermilk flavored with self-denial and was ready to fare forth into the world of temptation around him.

The telephone jangled against his nerves and he jumped, grabbing for it impatiently before he remembered; he addressed the mouthpiece contritely. "Phineas Potts speaking."

It was Mr. Sloane, his lusty animal voice barking out from the receiver. "'Lo, Phin, they told me you're ready to come down to work today. Business is booming and we can use you. How about it?"

"Certainly, Mr. Sloane. I'm not one to shirk my duty." There was no reason for the call that Potts could see; he hadn't missed a day in twelve years. "You know—"

"Sure, O. K. That's fine. Just wanted to warn you that we've moved. You'll see the name plate right across the street when you come out—swell place, too. Sure you can make it all right?"

"I shall be there in ten minutes, Mr. Sloane," Phineas assured him, and remembered in time to hang up without displaying distaste. *Tch*, poor Sloane, wallowing in sin and ignorant of the doom that awaited him. Why the last time Phineas had chided his employer—mildly, too—Sloane had actually laughed at him! Dear. Well, no doubt he incurred grace by trying to save the poor lost soul, even though his efforts seemed futile. Of course, there was danger in consorting with such people, but no doubt his sacrifices would be duly recorded.

There was a new elevator boy, apparently, when he came out of his room. He sniffed pointedly at the smoke from the boy's cigarette; the boy twitched his lips, but did not throw it away.

"O. K., bub," he grunted as the doors clanked shut, grating across Phineas' nerves, "I don't like it no better'n you will, but here we are."

Bub! Phineas glared at the shoulders turned to him and shuddered. He'd see Mrs. Biddle about this later.

Suppressing his feelings with some effort, he headed across the lobby, scarcely noting it, and stepped out onto the street. Then he stopped. That was the second jolt. He swallowed twice, opened his eyes and lifted them for the first time in weeks, and looked again. It hadn't changed. Where there should have been a little twisted side street near the tenements, he saw instead a broad, gleaming thoroughfare, busy with people and bright in warm golden sunlight. Opposite, the ugly stores were replaced with bright, new office buildings, and the elevated tracks were completely missing. He swung slowly about, clutching his umbrella for support as he faced the hotel; it was still a hotel—but not his—definitely not his. Nor was the lobby the same. He fumbled back into it, shaken and bewildered.

The girl at the desk smiled up at him out of dancing eyes, and she certainly wasn't the manager. Nor would prim Mrs. Biddle, who went to his church, have hired this brazen little thing; both her lips and fingernails were bright crimson, to begin with, and beyond that he preferred not to go.

The brazen little thing smiled again, as if glorying in her obvious idolatry. "Forget something, Mr. Potts?"

"I . . . uh . . . no. That is . . . you know who I am?"

She nodded brightly. "Yes, indeed, Mr. Potts. You moved in yesterday. Room 408. Is everything satisfactory?"

Phineas half nodded, gulped, and stumbled out again. Moved in? He couldn't recall it. Why should he leave Mrs. Biddle's? And 408 was his old room number, the room was identical with the one he had lived in, even to the gray streak on the wallpaper that had bothered his eyes for years. Something was horribly wrong—first the lack of memory, then Sloane's peculiar call, now this. He was too upset even to realize that this was probably another temptation set before him.

Mechanically, Phineas spied Sloane's name plate on one of the new buildings and crossed over into it. "Morning, Mr. Potts," said the elevator boy, and Phineas jumped. He'd never seen this person before, either. "Fourth floor, Mr. Potts. Mr. Sloane's office is just two doors down."

Phineas followed the directions automatically, found the door marked "G. R. Sloane—Architect," and pushed into a huge room filled with the almost unbearable clatter of typewriters and Comptometers, the buzz of voices, and the jarring thump of an addressing machine. But this morning the familiarity of the sound seemed like a haven out of the wilderness until he looked around. Not only had Sloane moved, but he'd apparently also expanded and changed most of his office force. Only old Callahan was left, and Callahan—Strange, he felt sure Callahan had retired or something the year before. Oh, well, that was the least of his puzzles.

Callahan seemed to sense his stare, for he jumped up and brought a hamlike fist down on Phineas' back, almost knocking out the ill-fitting false teeth. "Phin Potts, you old doommonger! Welcome back!" He thumped again and Potts coughed, trying to reach the spot and rub out the sting. Not only did Callahan have to be an atheist—an argumentative one—but he had to indulge in this gross horseplay. Why hadn't the man stayed properly retired?

"Mr. Sloane?" he managed to gurgle.

Sloane himself answered, his rugged face split in a grin. "Hi, Phin. Let him alone, Callahan. Another thump like that and I'll have to hire a new draftsman. Come on, Phin, there's the devil's own amount of work piled up for you now that you're back from your little illness." He led around a bunch of tables where bright-painted hussies were busily typing, down a hall, and into the drafting room, exchanging words with others that made Phineas wince. Really, his language seemed to grow worse each day.

"Mr. Sloane, would you please—"

"Mind not using such language," Sloaned finished, and grinned. "Phin, I can't help it. I feel too good. Business is terrific and I've got the world by the tail. How do you feel?"

"Very well, thank you." Phineas fumbled and caught the thread of former conversation that had been bothering him. "You said something about—illness?"

"Think nothing of it. After working for me twelve years, I'm not going to dock your pay for a mere month's absence. Kind of a shame you had to be off just when I needed you, but such things will happen, so we'll just forget it, eh?" He brushed aside the other's muttered attempt at questioning and dug into the plans. "Here, better start on this—you'll notice some changes, but it's a lot like what we used to do; something like the *Oswego* we built in '39. Only thing that'll give you trouble is the new steel they put out now, but you can follow specifications on that."

Phineas picked up the specifications, ran them over, and blinked. This would never do; much as he loathed the work, he was an excellent draftsman, and he knew enough of general structural design to know this would never do. "But, two-inch I beams here—"

"'Sall right, Phin, structural strength is about twelve times what you're used to. Makes some really nice designing possible, too. Just follow the things like I said, and I'll go over it all later. Things changed a little while you were delirious. But I'm in a devil of a rush right now. See you." He stuck his body through the door, thrust his head back inside and cocked an eyebrow. "Lunch? Need somebody to show you around, I guess."

"As you wish, Mr. Sloane," agreed Phineas. "But would you please mind—"

"Not swearing. Sure, O. K. And no religious arguments this time; if I'm damned, I like it." Then he was gone, leaving Phineas alone—he couldn't work with the distraction of others, and always had a room to himself.

So he'd been sick, had he, even delirious? Well, that might explain things. Phineas had heard that such things sometimes produced a hiatus in the memory, and it was a better explanation than nothing. With some relief, he put it out of his mind, remembering only to confess how sinfully he'd lost his trust in divine guidance this morning, shook his head mournfully, and began work with dutiful resignation. Since it had obviously been ordained that he should make his simple living at drafting, draft he would, with no complaints, and there would be no fault to be found with him there.

Then the pen began to scratch. He cleaned and adjusted it, finding nothing wrong, but still it made little grating sounds on the paper, lifting up the raw edges of his nerves. Had Phineas believed in evolution, he'd have said the hair his ancestors had once grown was trying to stand on end, but he had no use for such heretical ideas. Well, he was not one to complain. He unclenched his teeth and sought forbearance and peace within.

Then, outside, the addressograph began to thump again, and he had to force himself not to ruin the lines as his body tried to flinch. Be patient, all these trials would be rewarded. Finally he turned to the only anodyne he knew, contemplation of the fate of heretics and sinners. Of course he was sorry for them, roasting eternally and crying for water which they would never get—very sorry for the poor deluded creatures, as any righteous man should be. Yet still they had been given their chance and not made proper use of it, so it was only just. Picturing morbidly the hell of his most dour Puritan ancestors—something very real to him—he almost failed to notice the ache of his bunion where the cheap shoes pinched. But not quite.

Callahan was humming out in the office, and Phineas could just recognize the tune. Once the atheist had come in roaring drunk, and before they'd sent him home, he'd cornered Phineas and sung it through, unexpurgated. Now, in time with the humming, the words insisted in trickling through the suffering little man's mind, and try as he would, they refused to leave. Prayer did no good. Then he added Callahan to the tortured sinners, and that worked better.

"Pencils, shoestrings, razor blades?" The words behind him startled him, and he regained his balance on the stool with difficulty. Standing just inside the door was a one-legged hunchback with a handful of cheap articles. "Pencils?" he repeated. "Only a nickel. Help a poor cripple?" But the grin on his face belied the words.

"Indeed no, no pencils." Phineas shuddered again as the fellow hobbled over to a window and rid himself of a chew of tobacco. "Why don't you try the charities? Furthermore, we don't allow beggars here."

"Ain't none," the fellow answered with ambiguous cheerfulness, stuffing in a new bite.

"Then have faith in the Lord and he will provide." Naturally, man had been destined to toil through the days of his life in this mortal sphere, and toil he must to achieve salvation. He had no intention of ruining this uncouth person's small chance to be saved by keeping him in idleness.

The beggar nodded and touched his cap. "One of them, eh? Too bad. Well, keep your chin up, maybe it'll be better later." Then he went off down the hall, whistling, leaving Phineas to puzzle over his words and give it up as a bad job.

Potts rubbed his bunion tenderly, then desisted, realizing that pain was only a test, and should be borne meekly. The pen still scratched, the addressing machine thumped, and a bee had buzzed in somehow and went zipping about. It was a large and active bee.

Phineas cowered down and made himself work, sweating a little as the bee lighted on his drafting board. Then, mercifully, it flew away and for a few minutes he couldn't hear it. When it began again, it was behind him. He started to turn his head, then decided against it; the bee might take the motion as an act of aggression, and declare war. His hands on the pen were moist and clammy, and his fingers ached from gripping it too tightly, but somehow, he forced himself to go on working.

The bee was evidently in no hurry to leave. It flashed by his nose, buzzing, making him jerk back and spatter a blob of ink into the plans, then went zooming around his head and settled on his bald spot. Phineas held his breath and the bee stood pat. Ten, twenty, thirty seconds. His breath went out suddenly with a rush. The insect gave a brief buzz, evidently deciding the noise was harmless, and began strolling down over his forehead and out onto his nose. It tickled; the inside of his nose tickled sympathetically.

"No, no," Phineas whispered desperately. "N—AH*chee*OO! EEOW!" He grabbed for his nose and jerked violently, bumping his bunion against the desk and splashing more ink on the plans. "Damn, oh, da—"

It was unbelievable; it couldn't be true! His own mouth had betrayed him! With shocked and leaden fingers he released the pen and bowed his head, but no sense of saving grace would come. Too well he could remember that even the smallest sin deserves just damnation. Now he was really sweating, and the visions of eternal torment came trooping back; but this time he was in Callahan's place, and try as he would, he couldn't switch. He was doomed!

Callahan found him in that position a minute later, and his rough mocking laugh cut into Phineas' wounded soul. "Sure, an angel as I live and breathe." He dumped some papers onto the desk and gave another back-breaking thump. "Got the first sheets done, Phin?"

Miserably Phineas shook his head, glancing at the clock. They should have been ready an hour ago. Another sin was piled upon his burden, beyond all hope of redemption, and of all people, Callahan had caught him not working when he was already behind. But the old Irishman didn't seem to be gloating.

"There now, don't take it so hard, Phin. Nobody expects you to work like a horse when you've been sick. Mr. Sloane wants you to come out to lunch with him now."

"I . . . uh—" Words wouldn't come.

Callahan thumped him on the back again, this time lightly enough to rattle only two ribs. "Go along with you. What's left is beginner's stuff and I'll finish it while you're eating. I'm ahead and got nothing to do, anyhow. Go on." He practically picked the smaller man off the stool and shoved him through the door. "Sloane's waiting. Heck, I'll be glad to do it. Feel so good I can't find enough to keep me busy."

Sloane was flirting with one of the typists as Phineas plogged up, but he wound up that business with a wink and grabbed for his hat. "'Smatter, Phin, you look all in? Bad bruise on your nose, too. Well, a good lunch'll fix the first part, at least. Best damned food you ever ate, and right around the corner."

"Yes, Mr. Sloane, but would you . . . uh!" He couldn't ask that now. He himself was a sinner, given to violent language. Glumly he followed the other out and into the corner restaurant. Then, as he settled into the seat, he realized he couldn't eat; first among his penances should be giving up lunches.

"I . . . uh . . . don't feel very hungry, Mr. Sloane. I'll just have a cup of tea, I think." The odors of the food in the clean little restaurant that brought twinges to his stomach would only make his penance that much greater.

But Sloane was ordering for two. "Same as usual, honey, and you might as well bring a second for my friend here." He turned back to Phineas. "Trouble with you, Phin, is that you don't eat enough. Wait'll you get a whiff of the ham they serve here—and the pie! Starting now, you're eating right if I have to stuff it down you. Ah!"

Service was prompt, and plates began to appear before the little man's eyes. He could feel his mouth watering, and had to swallow to protest. Then the look in Sloane's eye made him decide not to. Well, at least he could fast morning and night instead. He nodded to himself glumly, wishing his craven appetite wouldn't insist on deriving so much pleasure from the food.

"And so," Sloane's voice broke in on his consciousness again, "after this, you're either going

to promise me you'll eat three good meals a day or I'll come around and stuff it down you. Hear?"

"Yes. Mr. Sloane, but—"

"Good. I'm taking that as a promise."

Phineas cringed. He hadn't meant it that way; it couldn't go through as a promise. "But—"

"No buts about it. Down there I figured you had as a good a chance of being right as I did, so I didn't open my mouth on the subject. But up here, that's done with. No reason why you can't enjoy life now."

That was too much. "Life," said Phineas, laying down his knife and preparing for siege, "was meant to give us a chance to prepare for the life to come, not to be squandered in wanton pleasure. Surely it's better to suffer through a few brief years, resisting our temptations, than to be forever damned to perdition. And would you sacrifice heaven for mere mundane cravings, transient and worthless?"

"Stow it, Phin. Doesn't seem to me I sacrificed much to get here." Then, at Phineas' bewildered look. "Don't tell me you don't realize where you are? They told me they were sending a boy with the message; well, I guess he just missed you. You're dead, Phin! *This* is heaven! We don't talk about it much, but that's the way it is."

"No!" The world was rolling in circles under Phineas' seat. He stared uncomprehendingly at Sloane, finding no slightest sign of mockery on the man's face. And there was the hole in the memory of sins, the changes, and—Callahan! Why, Callahan had died and been buried the year before; and here he was, looking ten years younger, and hearty as ever. But it was all illusion; of course, it was all illusion. Callahan wouldn't be in heaven. "No, it can't be."

"But it is, Phin. Remember? I was down your way to get you for overtime work and yelled at you just as you came out of your house. Then you started to cross, I yelled again— Come back now?"

There'd been a screeching of tires, Sloane running toward him suddenly, waving frantically, and —blackout! "Then it hit? And this . . . is—"

"Uh-huh. Seems they picked me up with a shovel, but it took a month to finish you off." Sloane dug into the pie, rolling it on his tongue and grinning. "And this is Hereafter. A darned good one, too, even if nobody meets you at the gate to say 'Welcome to heaven.'"

Phineas clutched at the straw. "They didn't tell you it was heaven, then? Oh." That explained everything. Of course, he should have known. This wasn't heaven, after all; it couldn't be. And though it differed from his conceptions, it most certainly could be the other place; there'd been that bee. *Tch*, it was just like Callahan and Sloane to enjoy perdition, misguided sinners, glorying in their unholiness.

Slowly the world righted itself, and Phineas Potts regained his normal state. To be sure, he'd used an evil word, but what could be expected of him in this vile place; they'd never hold it against him under the circumstances. He lowered his eyes thankfully, paying no attention to Sloane's idle remarks about Unfortunates. Now if he could just find the authorities of this place and get the mistake straightened out, all might yet be well. He had always done his best to be righteous. Perhaps a slight delay, but not long; and then—no Callahan, no Sloane, no drafting, or bees, or grating noises!

He drew himself up and looked across at Sloane, sadly, but justly, doomed to this strange Gehenna. "Mr. Sloane," he asked firmly, "is there some place here where I can find . . . uh . . . authorities to . . . umm—"

"You mean you want to register a complaint? Why sure, big white building about six blocks down; Adjustment and Appointment office." Sloane studied him thoroughly. "Darned if you don't look like you had a raw deal about something, at that. Look, Phin, they make mistakes sometimes, of course, but if they've handed you the little end, we'll go right down there and get it put right."

Phineas shook his head quickly. The proper attitude, no doubt, was to leave Sloane in ignorance of the truth as long as possible, and that meant he'd have to go alone. "Thank you, Mr. Sloane, but I'll go by myself, if you don't mind. And . . . uh . . . if I don't come back . . . uh—"

"Sure, take the whole afternoon off. Hey, wait, aren't you gonna finish lunch?"

But Phineas Potts was gone, his creaking legs carrying him out into the mellow noon sunlight and toward the towering white building that must be his destination. The fate of a man's soul is nothing to dally over, and he wasn't dallying. He tucked his umbrella close under his arm to avoid contact with the host of the damned, shuddering at the thought of mingling with them. Still, undoubtedly this torture would be added to the list of others, and his reward be made that much greater. Then he was at the "Office of Administration, Appointments and Adjustments."

There was another painted Jezebel at the desk marked "Information," and he headed there, barely collecting his thoughts in time to avoid disgraceful excitement. She grinned at him and actually winked! "Mr. Potts, isn't it? Oh, I'm so sorry you left before our messenger arrived. But if there's something we can do now—"

"There is," he told her firmly, though not too unkindly; after all, her punishment was ample without his anger. "I wish to see an authority

here. I have a complaint; a most grievous complaint."

"Oh, that's too bad, Mr. Potts. But if you'll see Mr. Alexander, down the hall, third door left, I'm sure he can adjust it."

He waited no longer but hurried where she pointed. As he approached, the third door opened and a dignified-looking man in a gray suit stepped to it. The man held out a hand instantly. "I'm Mr. Alexander. Come in, won't you? Katy said you had a complaint. Sit right over there, Mr. Potts. Ah, so. Now if you'll tell me about it, I think we can straighten it all out."

Phineas told—in detail. "And so," he concluded firmly—quite firmly, "I feel I've been done a grave injustice, Mr. Alexander. I'm positive my destination should have been the other place."

"The other place?" Alexander seemed surprised.

"Exactly so. Heaven, to be more precise."

Alexander nodded thoughtfully. "Quite so, Mr. Potts. Only I'm afraid there's been a little misunderstanding. You see . . . ah . . . this is heaven. Still, I can see you don't believe me yet, so we've failed to place you properly. We really want to make people happy here, you know. So, if you'll just tell me what you find wrong, we'll do what we can to rectify it."

"Oh." Phineas considered. This might be a trick, of course, but still, if they could make him happy here, give him his due reward for the years filled with temptation resisted and noble suffering in meekness and humility, there seemed nothing wrong with it. Possibly, it came to him, there were varying degrees of blessedness, and even such creatures as Callahan and his ilk were granted the lower ones—though it didn't seem quite just. But certainly his level wasn't Callahan's.

"Very well," he decided. "First, I find myself living in that room with the gray streak on the wallpaper, sir, and for years I've loathed it; and the alarm and telephone; and—"

Alexander smiled. "One at a time please. Now, about the room. I really felt we'd done a masterly job on that, you know. Isn't it exactly like your room on the former level of life? Ah, I see it is. And didn't you choose and furnish that room yourself?"

"Yes, but—"

"Ah, then we were right. Naturally, Mr. Potts, we assumed that since it was of your own former creation, it was best suited to you. And besides, you need the alarm and telephone to keep you on time and in contact with your work, you know."

"But I loathe drafting." Phineas glared at this demon who was trying to trap him, expecting it to wilt to its true form. It didn't. Instead the thing that was Mr. Alexander shook its head slowly and sighed.

"Now that is a pity; and we were so pleased

Nightmare come true

○ *I get the screaming horrers when I remember. Suddenly I'm on a wind-swept terrace, staring at a thin blue line of smoke rising from an ashtray in the apartment of . . . a woman who had been dead for three days. . . .*

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Street & Smith's November

Detective Story

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

to find we could even give you the same employer as before. Really we felt you'd be happier under him than a stranger. However, if you don't like it, I suppose we could change. What other kind of work would you like?"

Now that was more like it, and perhaps he had even misjudged Alexander. Work was something Phineas hadn't expected, but—yes, that would be nice, if it could be arranged here. "I felt once I was *called*," he suggested.

"Minister, you mean? Now that's fine. Never get too many of them, Mr. Potts. Wonderful men, do wonderful work here. They really add enormously to the happiness of our Hereafter, you know. Let me see, what experience have you had?" He beamed at Potts, who thawed under it; then he turned to a bookshelf, selected a heavy volume and consulted it. Slowly the beam vanished, and worry took its place.

"Ah, yes, Phineas Theophilus Potts. Yes, entered training 1903. Hm-m-m. Dismissed after two years of study, due to a feeling he might . . . might not be quite temperamentally suited to the work and that he was somewhat too fana . . . ahem . . . overly zealous in his criticism of others. Then transferred to his uncle's shop and took up drafting, which was thereafter his life's work. Hm-m-m. Really, that's too bad." Alexander turned back to Phineas. "Then, Mr. Potts, I take it you never had any actual experience at that sort of work?"

Phineas squirmed. "No, but—"

"Too bad." Alexander sighed. "Really, I'd like to make things more to your satisfaction, but after all, no experience—afraid it wouldn't do. Tell you what, we don't like to be hasty in our judgments; if you'll just picture exactly the life you want—no need to describe, I'll get it if you merely think it—maybe we can adjust things. Try hard now."

With faint hope, Phineas tried. Alexander's voice droned out at him. "A little harder. No, that's only a negative picture of what you'd like not to do. Ah . . . um, no. I thought for a minute you had something, but it's gone. I think you're trying to picture abstractions, Mr. Potts, and you know one can't do that; I get something very vague, but it makes no sense. There! That's better."

He seemed to listen a few seconds longer, and Phineas was convinced now it was all sham; he'd given up trying. What was the use? Vague jumbled thoughts were all he had left, and now Alexander's voice broke in on them.

"Really, Mr. Potts, I'm afraid there's nothing we can do for you. I get a very clear picture now, but it's exactly the life we'd arranged for you, you see. Same room, same work. Apparently that's the only life you know. Of course, if you want to improve, we have a great many very fine schools located throughout the city."

Phineas jerked upright, the control over his temper barely on. "You mean . . . you mean, I've got to go on like that?"

"Afraid so."

"But you distinctly said this was heaven."

"It is."

"And I tell you," Phineas cried, forgetting all about controlling his temper, "that this is hell."

"Quite so, I never denied it. Now, Mr. Potts, I'd like to discuss this further, but others are waiting, so I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave."

Alexander looked up from his papers, and as he looked, Phineas found himself outside the door, shaken and sick. The door remained open as the girl called Katy came up, looked at him in surprise, and went in. Then it closed, but still he stood there, unable to move, leaning against the wooden frame for support.

There was a mutter of voices within, and his whirling thoughts seized on them for an anchor. Katy's voice first. "—seems to take it terribly hard, Mr. Alexander. Isn't there something we can do?"

Then the low voice of Alexander. "Nothing, Katy. It's up to him now. I suggested the schools, but I'm afraid he's another Unfortunate. Probably even now he's out there convincing himself that all this is merely illusion, made to try his soul and test his ability to remain unchanged. If that's the case, well, poor devil, there isn't much we can do, you know."

But Phineas wasn't listening then. He clutched the words he'd heard savagely to his bosom and went stiffly out and back toward the office of G. R. Sloane across from the little room, No. 408. Of course he should have known. All this is merely illusion, made to try his soul. Illusion and test, no more.

Let them try him, they would find him humble in his sufferings as always, not complaining, resisting firmly their temptations. Even though Sloane denied him the right to fast, still he would find some way to do proper penance for his sins; though Callahan broke his back, though a thousand bees attacked him at once, still he would prevail.

"Forgive and guide me to sin no more, but preserve me in righteousness all the days of my life," he repeated, and turned into the building where there was more work and misery waiting for him. Sometime he'd be rewarded. Sometime.

Back in his head a small shred of doubt sniggered gleefully.

THE END.

at last

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CZECH INTERLUDE

By Vic Phillips

● Lieutenant Untmeyer didn't quite understand at first—he wasn't used to the old, grim ways of Prague. But the captain promised him many companions would soon join him. The Czechs could be depended on—

Illustrated by Cartier

Curfew in Prague. The night was dead still, the streets deserted as the military regulations directed. Lieutenant Untmeyer heard the sound of his own footfalls echoing back from the ancient walls, long familiar with the beat of military step. The Teutons had been here before, so had the Magyars, the Moravians, the Slavs, Poles, Slovaks, Huns, Austrians, Prussians, Tartars and a dozen others. All had poured into the ancient town.

Sometimes conquered, sometimes conquering, the Bohemian Czechs fought back savagely. The cold, dogged ferocity of the race prevailed for a thousand years. The country was still Bohemia, the people still mainly Czechs. The old town waited in brooding, watchful silence, an experienced, deadly warrior. Sooner or later this new conqueror would make a mistake.

The lieutenant's spine was very straight, eyes strictly front but flickering to all the silently menacing shadows. A little of the tenseness went out of him. Feet approached with the mechanical precision of a soldier.

"Good evening, Herr Lieutenant. All is well?"

"All is quiet, Herr Captain." A salute went with that. He felt better. He had comrades in this conquered city. Good German was to be heard reassuringly through the tangle of Czech. One more sentry post to visit, then back to the officers' quarters, beer and cigarettes and the talk of home and the assurance that goes with a conquering army in a subject land. These stiff-necked Czechs would learn sooner or later—

The lieutenant gasped and coughed, stumbling forward as something slammed violently into his back. He kept his feet and whirled around, his pistol filled his hand.

"What the devil—" A shadowy form loomed up through the dimness. He saw the outline of a spiked helmet, caught the gleam of saber and baldric, the sheen of polished high boots. He fumbled the pistol back into its holster.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Herr General. I thought . . . curfew—"

"An understandable error, Herr Lieutenant. My rank is captain, but thank you for the promotion. You are . . . uh . . . new here—perhaps?" The lieutenant's head felt fizzy.

"Yes, Herr Captain, I suppose I am—" There was something he had to do—something. It got away from him.

"You were returning to barracks?" The captain's voice held polite inquiry.

"Yes . . . yes, I was," the lieutenant mumbled. "I was going back—" His voice trailed off, another dim figure approached through the dark.

"Ah—Friedrich von Braustich," the captain greeted. "Permit me to present Lieutenant Untmeyer."

The newcomer was dressed from head to foot in glinting, reinforced steel mail. Special shock troops, no doubt, but what was he doing here at this hour? There must be something— The lientenant struggled desperately against the fog that was trying to seep into his brain.

"Gentlemen, there must be some mistake— It is long after curfew—I have orders—"

"Curfew? Hoho, Braustich! Did you hear what he said? Curfew!"

The captain's voice boomed out in a peal of laughter, thunderous in the silent street. It grew and rose and filled the air. The lieutenant felt it get into his throat, heard his own voice shrill out and scream in a mad insanity of mirth. Abruptly it cut off, the echoes skulked away and died in the dark. The lieutenant started in dumb horror. Von Braustich was laughing a bubbling gurgle of ghastly hilarity, his head rolling terribly from side to side. It fell forward and landed with a thump, face downward on the pavement. The laughter died out.

"Please, I beg your pardon, captain. But would you mind?" it asked diffidently.

"Oh, I am sorry. I should remember," the captain apologized. He stopped to pick up the fallen head and the lieutenant's horrified eyes beheld the back of the captain's skull crushed to a bloody pulp. The captain carefully replaced von Braustich's head, the two of them glanced at the lieutenant.

"Something the matter—"

"Good heavens! Your head—"

"Oh, that. Carelessness, lieutenant. I walked alone down one of these streets. A large stone, I think it was from a window—I have never been sure. It was a bit sudden."

Braustich felt the lieutenant's staring eyes.

"Mooch the same," he explained in his ghastly burble. "I was Grand Master of the Teutonic Order when we first came here. One night we slept too well. They took us in barracks. And you?"

"Me?"

"Sometimes they don't know right away," the captain suggested.

A corporal's guard clattered out of the night at the double. They grouped quickly around a still figure on the pavement. They rolled it over and the lieutenant stared with sick realization at his own face.

"Dead—"

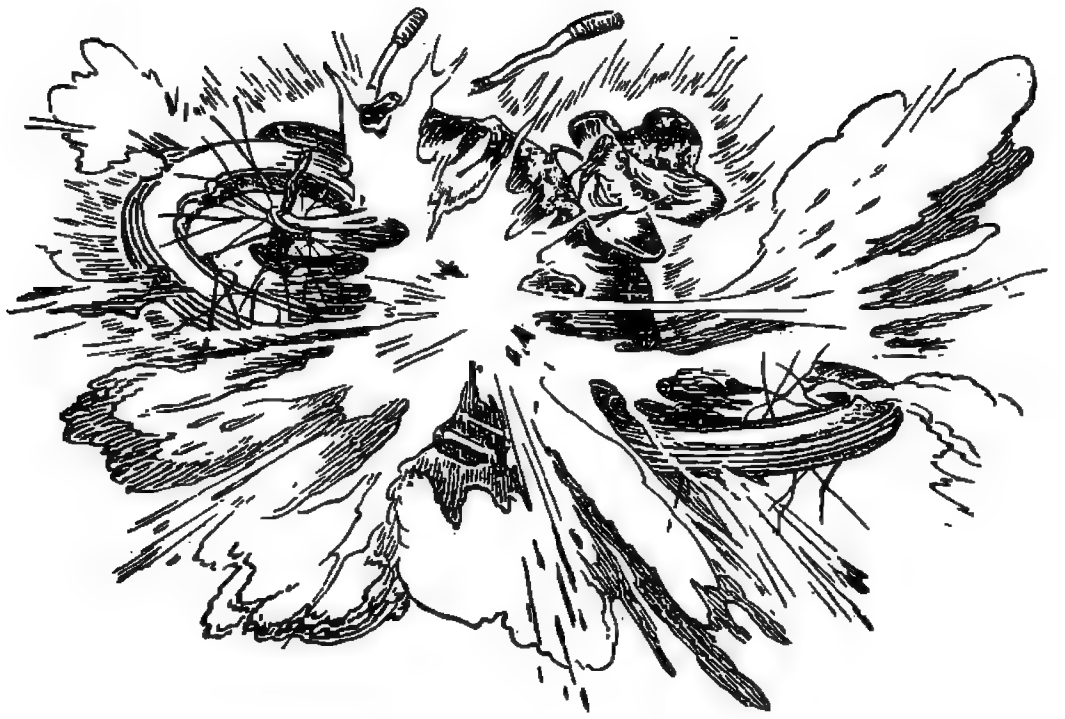
"Oh *ja*, but you are lucky," Braustich burbled. "This modern way is good, a bullet in the back is no inconvenience at all."

The lieutenant watched one of the guard around his body step through the captain without noticing.

"My comrades . . . I'll never—" the lieutenant mumbled; his voice trailed off.

"Comrades? Hoho Braustich! He says comrades! You'll have plenty, Herr Lieutenant, don't worry. We can trust these Czechs." His hell-born laugh ripped out across the street; the walls of Prague threw it back with silent practiced skill.

THE END.



MR. ARSON

By L. Sprague de Camp

● **The gentleman took a correspondence school course in magic—which was probably all right. But he didn't wait to finish it, and that was definitely all wrong—**

Illustrated by Orban

As Clem Buckminster, M. H. S. I. salesman for the Bronx, hung up a slightly overheated telephone, his superior cocked an eye at him and asked: "Was that the Dangerous Dane?"

Buckminster snickered dutifully. "Yeah, that was Grinnig. He's all excited about somepin. He wants me to come—"

"Does he want to shift his course again?" inquired the sales manager for the New York district.

"No; least he didn't say that. He wouldn't tell—"

"I've told you before, Clem," continued Andrews, "that this business of signing Grinnig up for a new course every month has got to stop. Let him finish one of the old ones. He's begun courses in—let me see—air conditioning, highway engineering, structural drafting, fruit growing, welding, and oil heating, and he's never gotten beyond the first lesson of any."

"But," pleaded Buckminster, "every time he finishes the foist lesson, he calls me in and says, 'To hell wit' it. Gimme another'. 'Scuse me, Miss Cope." The last was to Andrews' secretary. "What can I do?"

"Let him slide. He's not the type that can benefit from a correspondence course."

"But I gotta oin my living. Hi, Harry!" This was to Harrison Galt, M. H. S. I. salesman for Brooklyn, who had just come in to collect the daily list of inquiries from prospective students in his district, which had

been forwarded from the home office in Paterson.

Andrews continued implacably: "I know you want your half of the ten-dollar deposit. But I have specific instructions from the home office to stop signing up these lightweights who just happen to be short on sales resistance. They figured that handling their courses costs more than it's worth. Anyway, it gives the Mercury Home Study Institute a bad name."

"Anyway," sulked Buckminster, "I never signed up no Oil Browder, like one of our competitors did."

Andrews, a dryly precise man, ignored this. He asked: "What about Grinnig? Does he want to shift from oil heating to bee keeping?"

"He ain't on oil heating," said Buckminster. "He's on that new one, nigromancy."

"Huh?"

"Yeah, don'tcha remember? Some new idear of the School of Shop Practice. We ain't even got a folder on it, but when Grinnig seen it in one of the ads he just had to have it. So I wrote Paterson and asked would they please send Grinnig the foist lesson booklet as soon as it was off the press."

Galt put in a word: "Speaking of the School of Shop Practice, one of my prospects told me he thought it would have to do with legal shenannigans, how to kite checks and such. Get it? He thought I meant *sharp* practice!"

"Ha, ha," said Buckminster. "The dialeck some of these guys talk, you wonder how they understand themselves. Well, so long, Mr. Andrews, I gotta—"

"Remember, Clem, no more changes of course!" interrupted Andrews. "What *is* this nigromancy course, anyway?"

Buckminster shrugged. "I dunno. Neither did Grinnig. That's why he wanted it."

"He's crazy," said Andrews. "And so are some of the heads in Paterson, I suspect. Nigromancy! Since the Old Man's been sick, Thurtle's been running the home office, practically." Julian Thurtle was the head of the School of Shop Practice.

"So long, Clem," said Galt. "One of these days the Dangerous Dane's gonna remember all those deposits you talked him outa, and take a poke at you."

"Grinnig's all right," grinned Buckminster. "He gets in fights because he's just an overgrown kid. That's it, an overgrown kid. But him and me get along fine. 'By." And Clem Buckminster, an inconspicuous figure of forty-odd with abundant but graying hair, went out softly singing:

"Down wit Hahvard, down wit Yale;
We get ah loining through the mail—"

Buckminster first sought Carl Grinnig at his normal place of employment, having assumed from Grinnig's wild talk that he was telephoning from there. But the shop head of the Alliance Oil Burner Co. informed Buckminster that the company's able, but erratic, mechanic was not in, allegedly because of sickness.

So the M. H. S. I. salesman rattled his jellopy over to East Tremont Avenue and turned north toward the boardinghouse where Grinnig lived. This was a large wooden frame building with a front porch and wooden scrollwork of a type not usually associated with New York City by those who do not realize that in such a large metropolis one can find specimens of practically everything, including shops selling hookahs and schools of bartending.

At the first intersection a policeman held up Buckminster's car with a decisive "Not this way, buddy!" Buckminster himself could see, beyond the cop, the backs of a small crowd of people, and over the heads of these the upperworks of a fire engine standing in front of Grinnig's house. He turned the car down a side street, parked, and walked toward the scene, observing that the house had several broken windows, and from these dark streaks of smoke or char ran up the clapboarded sides of the house.

"Mr. Buckminster!" said a voice. It was that of Carl Grinnig, a large, powerful, blond young man with a black eye and a couple of purplish discolorations about the jaw. He seized a flabby Buckminster arm in one huge hand.

"Yeah?" said Buckminster, suppressing the desire to wince. "Had a fire?"

"Had a *fire?* Yust wait till I tell you—"

Grinnig's explanation was drowned by an outburst of sound: exclamations from the crowd, smothered curses from a couple of firemen who ran out of the house to the engine, from which they took a couple of chemical extinguishers and dashed back. People pointed toward a curl of smoke that rose suddenly from one of the broken windows. Buckminster could hear people running about inside the house, and presently the smoke ceased.

A stout, harassed-looking civilian came out of the house and pushed through the people. Buckminster recognized the man as Grinnig's landlord. Grinnig called out: "Hey, Mr. Feldman! What is it this time?"

Feldman made motions of pulling nonexistent hair. "A book! A book up off the table I was liftingg, just a ordinary book it was, and when I open it, into flames it boists! Right in front of it the jantleman from the insurance company was standingg. His own eyes he dun't believe! Me, I'm gung crazy!" The house owner departed distractedly.

"You see, Mr. Buckminster?" rumbled Grinnig. "It's been like this all morning. First it was a calendar on the wall went up, *whoof*. Then a mattress caught fire. This book's about the twen-

tieth screwy fire. After the fire department had turned out for five or six of 'em they yust left an engine here and guys sitting in every room with chemical extinguishers."

"Did you get hoit in the fires?" asked Buckminster, eying the mechanic's obvious contusions.

"Naw, that was just a little fight with a coupla sailors. Di'n't amount to nothing on account of there was only three of them. But I gotta see you, quick."

"What have I got to do wit'—" began the correspondence-course salesman, but Grinnig shushed him warningly.

"We gotta talk alone somewheres. Come on, maybe there ain't nobody in old man Feldman's garage." And Grinnig dragged Buckminster willy-nilly up the driveway, growled, "Beat it, you kids," to a pair of small boys who were watching events from the roof of the two-car garage, and shoved the salesman within.

"Look, Mr. Buckminster," said the mechanic, "it's that nigromancy course you sold me."

"What is?" queried Buckminster.

"That made these here fires. But don't you say nothing about it," he added ominously.

"Course I wouldn't," said Buckminster hastily. "After all, we got a reputation to protect, too. But how come the course had anything to do with the fires? Don't make sense. If you don't like it, why doncha change?"

"I'm not interested in changing my course, but in stopping these here fires!" persisted Grinnig.

"We got a swell new course in aviation mechanics," said Buckminster. "Wouldn'tcha like to be an aviation mechanic? Big future; not like messing around with these smelly oil boiners. You could make some real dough with—"

"Listen," said Grinnig with strained patience, "every time you sell me a new course, you tell me it'll make me rich. Well, I ain't rich. If they're so hot, why don't you take one? How come you're still selling 'em on commission and living on coffee and sinkers?"

Buckminster shook his head sadly. "Too late for me. Shoulda started when I was a young guy like you, steada playing around and wasting my dough. My future's behind me." (This was all fairly close to the truth.) "Now, about that avi—"

"Shut up!" bellowed Grinnig. "I don't wanna hear nothing about no new courses." The burly mechanic fished out of a pocket a six-by-nine booklet with stiff green paper covers. "Look at this thing!"

Buckminster read:

Mercury Home Study Institute
NIGROMANCY
by Julian A. Thurlie
(Dean, School of Shop Practice)
Volume 1 Conjuration of Saganes

He turned the cover and looked at the beginning of the text. It began:

1. *What nigromancy is.* The science of nigromancy was defined many years ago by Paracelsus (P. A. T. B. von Hohenheim) as the conjuration, control, and exorcism (banishment) of the elemental spirits of earth, air, fire and water, called collectively Saganes. Since Paracelsus' time the knowledge of this science has largely gone out of existence, so that today it is regarded by many as mere superstition. This is incorrect. Used with proper knowledge and care, this science can be as useful to modern technicians as any other. Accordingly this course, based on recent research into some of the little-known writings of Paracelsus and his contemporaries, has been prepared.

2. *Outline of the Course.* The first three volumes deal respectively with the conjuration, control, and banishment of elemental spirits. Students are warned not to attempt any experimental conjurations whatever until they have mastered at least three parts and have passed the examination at the end of each volume. The later volumes deal with the more advanced aspects of nigromancy and with allied subjects such as necromancy, hydromancy, enchantment, and sortilege—

Buckminster commented: "Now I know the home office is nuts. What happened?"

"Well," said Grinnig, "I wasn't feeling so good after I finished with those sailors, see? Musta been something I ate. So I called the shop and they said sure, I could have the day off. So I thought I'd see if this course would really do the things it said it would. So I look through the book and find a ritual for conjuring up a salamander. You know what a salamander is; one of those little red things like a lizard."

Buckminster put in: "It says here not to try no conjurations until you finish the foist three lessons."

"Yeah, I know, but you think I'm gonna pay for a whole course if I don't know if it works? Anyway, I figure one of those little lizardy things couldn't do no damage."

"And it started the fires? G'wan!"

"Not the salamander; I mean, I didn't get no salamander, but a kind of a ball of fire. It ducked quick into a pair of work pants I had hanging up on my door and set 'em on fire. I grab the pants off the hook to beat the fire out, and the fireball dodges out through the crack of the door, so quick I can't hardly see it. And it's been flying around the house all morning setting fire to things."

"G'wan," repeated Buckminster. "Sure one of those sailors didn't clip you with a piece of pipe, or somepin?"

"Naw," said Grinnig scornfully. "I seen what I seen. And I figure I gotta have the third volume of the course right now, on account of it tells how to get rid of these things."

"You can't," replied the salesman. "The second volume oughta be just about off the press, and the thoid ain't even printed.

Anyway, I think you imagined it. Come down to the corner and I'll buy you a beer and tell you about how to be an aviation mechanic."

"I did not imagine it," persisted Grinnig.

"O. K., then, show me how you did it."

"O. K., wise guy, I'll show you. Gimme the book." Grinnig fished out the stub of a pencil, frowned over the diagrams, and slowly drew a number of complicated lines on the concrete floor of the garage. He took out a candle no longer than his thumb, lit it, and placed it on the floor. Then he mumbled a long series of sounds that sounded to Buckminster like continuous double-talk, pausing now and then to draw imaginary figures in the air with his pencil.

Carl Grinnig ended his spiel and shut the lesson book. "Aw right, Mr. Buckminster, you—Yumping Yudas!"

Over one of the diagrams, about ten feet from the two men, something was swiftly materializing. First came smoke and a smell of sulphur dioxide, then a dull-red glow that brightened to orange. Then they were confronted by what looked like the nude iron statue of a powerfully built man at incandescent temperatures. The heat from the apparition beat on their faces like the glow from an open furnace door, and they began to sweat.

The fire man surveyed Buckminster and Grinnig. When he spoke, it was in a deep, harsh, strongly accented voice: "Where—is—my—liddle—creature?"

"I dunno what you're talking about," said Grinnig, his fair skin paler than usual.

"Please, mister, go away," added Buckminster. "It's all a mistake!"

"Ha," rasped the newcomer. "Mistake. Mistake. But few mistakes does your trade allow. Where is my salamander?"

Grinnig swallowed and croaked: "You mean that fire thing? It's in that big house in back of you."

The visitor turned his massive head and whistled piercingly. Almost immediately a sphere of flickering orange flame the size of a soft baseball arrived with a rush, danced up and down in front of its master, and at length snuggled up under his armpit.

The glowing head raised slightly, and the men felt by the

increase of heat rather than saw the glowing eyeballs fasten themselves on them. "And now," said the fire man, "wherefore have you broken the Treaty?"

"What treaty?" said Grinnig.

"You know not? Ha." The apparition put out a hand to lean against the wooden side of the garage. There was an immediate burst of smoke where the hand touched the wall.

"Hi!" yelped Buckminster. The fire man took his hand away with a slight, grim smile, leaving a charred spot the shape of a hand on the wood.

"What, then, *do* you know?" he demanded.

"N-not so much," quavered the massive Grinnig. "I yust got this little book from the Mercury Home Study Institute and I wanted to try it out. So I did a little spell. Please, buddy, who are you and when are you going to let us out of here? It's damn hot!"

The thing smiled even more broadly. "You know not my real name even? You cannot control me?"

"I ain't come to that part of the course—"

"Ha! 'Tis rare fortune, indeed, that the Covenant should be breached by a brace of such witless bunglers as ye! This much

will I tell you: that I am of the race of the Saldines, which the meddling Paracelsus ignorantly called Rolamandri; one of the peoples of the fire world, even as my little salamander is one of the beasts of that world. When my pet vanished, I suspected some foul doings in your world, and watched for another opening of the door, the same which you forthwith furnished me. Ha! Now truly shall Fire come into its own!"

"Whatcha mean?" piped Buckminster.

"I'll show you what I mean! Give me that book!"

Grinnig extended the lesson booklet, and snatched his hand back as the red-hot arm shot out to seize the volume, which instantly went up in a puff of flame.

"Freeze it!" roared the fire elemental. "I should have bethought me of the perishability of your paper. Where can I obtain another such volume?"

"I dunno," babbled Buckminster, "unless you wana go clear out to Paterson."

"Where?"

"Paterson, New Joisey, where the home office is. They got the whole course out there."

"Then let us forth. But stay! I cannot move abroad without some garment, lest I attract the attention of the general."

"I'll say you would," murmured Buckminster. "You'd attrack the whole army."

"Give me, then, your clothing."

"Hey!" squawked the salesman. "They're too small for you, and anyway they'd boin up if you tried to put 'em on!"

"True," growled the Saldine. "I have it! There exists in your world a substance known before the Treaty as salamander skin, which in sooth is but a fabric woven of the strands of a certain fibrous rock. Fetch me a suit of this forthwith!"

"He means asbestos," explained Grinnig.

"Yeah, but how—"

"Fetch it!" thundered the Saldine, "ere I set my pet upon ye!" He plucked the salamander from under his armpit and whispered to it, and it zipped over close to the men and bobbed menacingly about them. They could feel its heat even in that oven atmosphere.

The elemental added: "But one of you; the smaller. The other shall remain as hostage, and do you but essay any treasons or alarums, I'll embrace the fellow *thus!*" He grinned fiendishly and wrung an imaginary dishrag with his huge fiery hands.

"O. K.," capitulated Buckminster. "Got any dough, Carl?"

Grinnig wordlessly handed over his wallet. The elemental stood aside long enough to let Buckminster, wincing at the scorching radiation, duck out the garage door. The Saldine called the salamander back to him and fell into a statuesque pose in the doorway, arms folded across his mighty chest and feet spread.

Carl Grinnig, seeing the only easy exit blocked again, sat down wearily on the concrete floor. In the ensuing wait he recovered some of his aplomb. Although he did not feel like a particularly dangerous Dane, he was too big and tough to be completely intimidated for long.

He remarked: "You never told me who you really are and what you want."

"Ha!" barked the Saldine and relapsed into silence.

"O. K., then I'll have to call you Arson."

"Arson?" The being grinned. "A good name, forsooth. How good you have yet no notion."

"How come you talk so funny?"

"Talk so funny?" frowned Arson. "What mean you? Verily, I speak what was the best English at the time of the Treaty, in your year 1623. I can comprehend that the tongue may have degenerated since then."

Grinnig shed his dripping shirt. A package of cigarettes flopped out of the breast pocket; he took one out and lit it, and blew out the match.

"You!" shouted the elemental suddenly, and advanced with menacing steps. "What mean you by destroying Fire, in my very presence?"

"B-but . . . I just blew out the match. You wouldn't want me to burn my finger? Or would you?" Grinnig flattened himself against the rear wall of the garage as the heat became intolerable.

"For that," thundered Arson, "you shall— But not yet, for I need you as hostage. 'Tis such vile comportment that marks you and your kind for their just deserts! I am even informed that you keep whole companies of men trained to quench fires!"

"You mean the fire departments?" sweated Grinnig. "Yeah, when a house catches fire, they try to put it out, natchly."

"Foul, wanton vandalism!" cried the Saldine. "When my brethren come—" He closed his mouth with a snap and retired, leaving Grinnig red of skin and half fainting from the roasting he had received.

"Hey, Mr. Grinnig!" called Clem Buckminster from outside the garage. "Tell him I got his stuff!"

Arson stood aside to admit the salesman with an armful of canvaslike material.

Buckminster explained: "I got it from a fire-apparatus company; it's one of these here asbestos suits. Got shoes and gloves. I borrowed a pair of tinsnips and some wire and fixed the helmet up so it looks almost like a hat. Looky. Took all our dough, even though it's second-hand."

While Buckminster chuckled with naïve pleasure over his ingenuity, the elemental pulled on the suit. When it was all in place and he had put on the altered helmet, he looked quite human except for the orange glow

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of the face that glared out from under the hat brim. Otherwise he might have been an ash collector or some other dirty-job worker in the costume of his calling. The two men drew long breaths of relief as the searing heat rays were cut off for the nonce.

"Come!" commanded Arson. "To Paterson, Oo Joisey." He cuffed them roughly ahead of him out of the garage and down the driveway, pausing to cast a speculative eye at Feldman's boardinghouse.

The fire engine was gone from the curb, though a couple of firemen were still in evidence. Several people were stacking furniture in the back yard. None paid attention to the trio, for in the bright sunlight even the incandescence of Arson's face was not noticeable unless one looked closely.

The Saldine muttered: "Right well has my little pet done, and he shall yet have an opportunity to finish his task. Would I could stop to attend the matter myself! Go on, you two!"

"Hey!" wailed Buckminster. "Are we gonna walk the whole way?"

"Of a certainty, unless you can provide a conveyance."

The salesman glanced down the street to where his car was parked, its stern just visible around the corner. "I got my car, but—"

"But what?"

"There wouldn't be room for all three of us, and anyway you'd boin it up!"

"Ha," said Arson flatly. He looked about. In the opposite direction a coal truck stood at the curb a block away. He pointed. "Is that one of your conveyances?"

"Yeah, it runs, if that's whatcha mean."

"Then shall we take it. It looks to be made of fire-resisting material."

"But it ain't ours! You can't just steal a truck like that!"

"Say you so?" snarled the fire man. He moved his arms, and the salamander appeared, bobbing up and down from the palm of his outstretched hand. "Shall I set my pet—"

"No, no," amended Buckminster quickly.

As they approached the truck, the men's hearts sank as they observed it to be unoccupied.

"The large one," announced Arson, "shall mount the rear of the conveyance with me. The other shall drive."

Grinnig hesitated just long enough for the elemental to make a move as if to seize him and throw him up into the empty truck bodily; the mechanic scrambled quickly up under his own power. Arson followed more deliberately. The truck's springs creaked as though a very considerable load had been added.

When Buckminster nervously slid into the driver's seat, the Saldine banged on the back of the cab. "Can you hear me?" he bellowed.

"Yeah, sure."

"Good. To Paterson, Oo Joisey, and swiftly!"

To get accustomed to the ponderous vehicle took Clem Buckminster several miles, and then he came to one of the approaches of the George Washington Bridge. Just before he reached the approach it occurred to him that perhaps trucks were not allowed on the bridge. While he slowed the truck, torn between fear of Arson and fear of the law, a second thought told him that to get pinched was exactly what he wanted. On his whole trip from East Tremont Avenue he had not seen a single policeman, who belong to a species that vanish like the snows in spring whenever one had a real need for them.

An occasional smell whiffed through the driver's cab; undoubtedly, thought Buckminster, scorched paint. The asbestos

suit would eventually warm up so that it radiated almost as much heat as the naked Arson. He pushed the accelerator to the floor boards as the truck crested the middle of the bridge roadway, and roared down the long slope toward the toll booths on the Jersey side.

He began to slow down as the distant blue-coated figures of the toll collectors came into view. Then a banging on the back of the cab informed him that Arson had words for him. They were: "Hasten! No stopping!" When Buckminster continued to apply the brake, he heard a shriek from Grinnig. Arson had snatched off a glove and thrust a fiery hand close to the luckless mechanic's face.

Clem Buckminster speeded up again, looking for a toll booth before which no autos were lined up. He found one, to his disappointment. Well, maybe the truck was too big to squeeze through the restricted opening and would get stuck between the concrete piers. If he had had suicidal courage, he might have chanced deliberately ramming an obstacle, but he was not that kind of person. He sighted on the opening as best he could and steered right through without even scratching the paint.

He was in the midst of the tangle of ramps west of the bridge when he at long last heard the welcome *we-e-e-e-ew* of a siren. Now he *had* to stop. As he slowed, a motorcycle pulled alongside. The cop pointed: "Down there!"

Buckminster steered into the less-used ramp indicated and came out on an ordinary street, where he stopped. The cop parked his cycle ahead of the truck and walked back. As he took out his pad he looked up at the cab with an expression more of pity than of anger. He said: "Say, buddy, don't you know *anything* about traffic laws?" When Buckminster could not answer, the policeman added: "A grown man like you oughta know you can't drive ya truck across the bridge at fifty—"

"Ain't my truck," croaked Buckminster.

"Now listen, buddy, it don't matter whether you're hired to drive—"

"I stole it, see?" said the salesman.

At this the policeman's voice simply dried up, and he stared with his mouth open until a motion on the curb side of the truck attracted his attention. This was Arson, who had descended from the truck body and was walking forward to the motorcycle. The elemental bent over the vehicle with interest.

"Hey, leggo that!" yelled the cop as Arson experimentally wiggled the handle bars.

The Saldine ignored the command and removed his gloves for more intimate contact. As the policeman started toward him, he clamped his red-hot hands on the framework, picked the cycle up, and with a creaking of tortured metal calmly twisted the whole thing out of shape.

Buckminster could see the paint beginning to curl and smoke; a tire burst into flame; and then, with a loud *whoof*, the gasoline tank went off and Arson was completely hidden in a vast cloud of flame and smoke. The cop jumped back and banged his elbow against a fender of the truck.

When the smoke cleared and the flames subsided, Arson was standing in a small sea of burning gasoline and still holding the blazing wreck of the cycle. He was unchanged except that his asbestos suit was of a slightly dirtier gray than before.

"It ain't . . . isn't real," said the cop to himself, rubbing his elbow.

The elemental now started toward the policeman, an evil grin on his glowing face. As he tramped he raised the motorcycle over his head. The cop shouted something which Buckminster missed, then drew his pistol. The gun barked three times, at a range where a miss was impossible; each shot was followed by a metallic clang such as one hears after a hit on

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a shooting-gallery target. Arson grinned more widely and hurled the motorcycle. The cop ducked, but a handle bar struck his head and he tumbled to the concrete as the cycle whizzed past the cab window.

Arson in leisurely manner walked back and climbed into the truck. Far down the street a few civilians were standing and watching, but none seemed eager to investigate. "Hence!" roared the Saldine through the back of the cab.

As he started the truck again, Clem Buckminster, for the first time in some years, prayed.

Before the truck came to the bridge over the Passaic River, the heat and stench which Buckminster now automatically associated with the presence of Arson became too strong for comfort even inside the cab. A glance in the mirror showed a fair-sized cloud of smoke billowing out from the truck body; and as the salesman began to slow the vehicle again, there was a muffled explosion and a burst of flame. The temperature soared alarmingly.

Buckminster pulled on the hand brake and swerved the truck off the road into the weeds. He scrambled out before it stopped rolling, to find the rear half of the truck enveloped in flames and Grinnig and the elemental already descended to earth. The mechanic was a pitiful sight, with blistered hands and singed eyebrows, and black with sweat-streaked coal dust.

"How much farther?" growled the Saldine.

"Coupla miles," said Buckminster resignedly.

"Good. We shall walk!" And Arson, shooing the men ahead of him, set out at a brisk stride.

When they had gone a few hundred yards from the conflagration, a car stopped to investigate the burning truck, and another, until there was a traffic jam on that section of the road. A police siren whined.

"Continue to wend," snapped Arson, "and look not back!"

They passed a section of road that was being widened, though no workmen were in sight at the moment. Several pieces of road machinery stood around on the new strip with canvas covers over their works.

"Conveyances!" muttered Arson. "Let us take another for our own use, as the journey grows tedious."

"Hey!" bleated Buckminster. "The gas tanks'll blow up if you get aboard, same as the truck did!"

"That," grinned the elemental nastily, "will be your misfortune!" He inspected a bulldozer. "Into the driver's seat, small one!"

"Won't do no good, Mr. Arson," protested Buckminster. "Gas tank's empty. See this here gauge?"

"Another, then," snorted Arson. But all the other pieces of equipment proved to have empty fuel tanks as well, the contractor having thriftily drained them before temporarily laying them up.

The last two machines inspected were a pair of road rollers; one a modern gasoline roller, the other an old-fashioned steam roller with a vertical boiler. This, too, lacked fuel, but investigation disclosed that it had water in its boiler.

Arson remarked: "I begin to fathom the operation of these devices. Yet this one appeareth to be of a nature different from the others. What is the quintessence of its active principle?"

Grinnig huskily explained the essentials of steam-engine operation.

"Ha!" grinned Arson. "Whereas it needs nought but a modicum of heat for its operation, forsooth I will furnish that!" He opened the door of the fire box, climbed onto the body, removed a shoe, and thrust a glowing foot into the opening. After a few minutes' wait, the elemental exclaimed: "Why starts this conveyance not? I wax impatient! O fool, think you to deceive me?"

"No, no!" chirped Buckminster. "Look at the gauge; she'll have steam pressure up any time now!"

They fell into silence, waiting, Buckminster hoping that by some miracle the United States army would descend on them to rescue him and his student and subdue Mr. Arson, if need be with heavy artillery. But nothing of the sort occurred; automobiles purred by indifferently. Buckminster was bright enough to guess that to yell "Help!" to one or two uncomprehending and ineffective civilians would merely make a bad situation worse.

At last steam was up. Buckminster opened the throttle and spun the steering wheel, which was connected to the forward roller by a worm gear and a chain. With a rapid *pop-pop-pop* the machine shudderingly ground over the unfinished road surface and onto the highway, and rattled on into Paterson.

Buckminster stopped the roller and pointed to a group of slightly dilapidated buildings that occupied one of Paterson's outlying blocks. "That's them," he explained. "The Mercury Home Study Institute."

As the party approached the nearest building, Buckminster thought furiously. Arson's vague threats had certainly implied that the fire elemental was up to no good. The salesman suspected that the Saldine wanted to get control of a set of the course booklets in order to conjure up more of his fiendish kind. But if he, Clem, could get hold of one of those booklets first, notably the ones dealing with the control and banishment of elementals, perhaps he could beat Arson to the punch.

So it was in a state of extreme alertness that Buckminster approached the building housing the Mercury printing establish-

ment. He turned to Arson and said: "The books are all in there. You wait here and I'll—"

"Ha, think you I'm such a dunce? Lead on and I'll follow!"

"But you'll set this old building on fire—"

A shove sent Buckminster staggering toward the nearest doorway. He shrugged and went in, Grinnig and Arson following. The elemental left black footprints of charred wood on the aged floor.

Down one side of the printshop ran a row of a dozen flatbed presses, about half of which were in action, their beds weaving back and forth under the cylinders with a continuous loud grumble. On the other side of the aisle along the presses was a row of low hand trucks, each of which bore a pile of large white sheets, varying from a foot to four feet in height. Some of these piles were fresh paper for the presses, some had been printed on one side only, and some had been printed on both sides and were waiting to be fed to the folding machines in the bindery, which occupied the other half of the building. At the far end of the bindery were a lot of hand trucks of another kind, on which were stacked hundreds of completed green Mercury lesson booklets and sets of various advertising literature. The first printing of Volume 1 of the nigromancy course would probably be here unless it had been taken over to the school building, whence the booklets were mailed to students and where the students' examinations were corrected.

Buckminster moved slowly down the line of trucks bearing the stacks of big squares of paper. He suppressed a whoop as he found what he wanted: a pile of printed sheets, each sheet having forty-eight pages of text on each side, and among the pages the first page of a Mercury booklet, with a heading:

NIGROMANCY

Volume 2 Control of Sagenes

Buckminster ran his eye hastily over the sheet, but encountered a difficulty. The pages were not grouped on the sheet in the order in which they would be read, but were so arranged that when the sheet was put in the folding machine, and folded and cut and folded and cut down to final form, these pages would then be in the proper order.

Nevertheless, Buckminster ran over the pages quickly, regardless of the fact that half of them were on the underside of the sheet and half the remainder were upside down. Sure enough, a subtitle caught his eye:

12. *Control of Trifertes (Fire Elementals).* The salamander, being a trifertis of relatively low intelligence, is comparatively easy to control—

"Excuse me," said a voice behind him, "but have you gents got permission from the office to look around the shop?"

Buckminster started guiltily; then recognized the foreman of the printshop. He said: "Hello, Jim; 'member me? Clem Buckminster, from the New York office."

"Hello," said the foreman mechanically. "It's pret' near quitting time, you know, and you'll have to—"

"Can you lend me a pencil, Jim?" asked Buckminster quickly. The foreman handed one over, and Buckminster, referring back to the printed sheet, began to draw figures on the floor.

"Ho!" muttered Arson suddenly. "What do you, wretch?"

The foreman looked at the elemental closely for the first time, and backed away in alarm as he observed the orange glow of the Saldine's visage, which was fairly conspicuous indoors. "Hey," he said, "who is this?"

"Mr. Arson, meet Mr. Slezak,"

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mumbled Buckminster.

"But—what's the matter with him?"

"He got sunboined, out at Jones Beach," explained the salesman, frowning as he realized that he would have to turn the print sheet over to get the information necessary to complete his ritual.

"I'll say he got burned," said Slezak. "You gotta use discretion. I got some good suntan oil that—"

"I see!" roared Arson. "You prepare a spell for me, eh? Bah!" The elemental snatched off his gloves, stuck them between his teeth, and began to assault the pile of sheets with his glowing hands. The upper sheets at once began to burn. Arson whipped them off in great handfuls, crumpled them, and tossed them, flaming, right and left.

Cries of alarm rang through the printery as smoke and pieces of burning paper rose and spread. At that moment the five-o'clock bell rang. The printers shut down their presses and raced for the doors, Buckminster and Grinnig among them. The whole middle of the printery was now a mass of blazing paper, from whose invisible center Arson roared with demoniac laughter.

Buckminster caught Grinnig's belt in the rear and hung on lest they be separated in the rush. When they had put a respectable distance between themselves and the now furiously smoking building, they looked back. Workmen were scattered all over the intervening area; clerks and instructors poured out of the school building. Among these Buckminster recognized a small group of men in coats and neckties as the executives.

"Come on," he said to Grinnig. "If we can find Thoitle, maybe we can fix Arson's wagon."

A policeman cleared a way for the fire engines. Buckminster and Grinnig worked their way around the cleared area to where the executives stood. The former called: "Oh, Mr. Thoitle!"

Julian Thurtle, dean of the School of Shop Practice of the Mercury Home Study Institute, looked about as much like a chimpanzee with a white handle-bar mustache as a man can without actually being a chimpanzee with a white handle-bar mustache. But he was a wise old teacher of technics whose courses, the texts for many of which he wrote himself, were up to college standards and had actually helped many ambitious young men on their way to success, as claimed in his company's advertisements.

He was conversing with the vice president in charge of sales, who was saying: "—of course, it's all insured, but it'll raise Ned with our publishing schedule, not to mention interrupting a lot of the courses. The Education Everywhere Institute won't be sorry to hear of it."

Thurtle sighed. "Yes, yes. Dear me. Maybe we could persuade the N. C. C. to help us out; they're pretty decent fellows—" He saw Buckminster and said: "Yes? Yes? You are . . . don't tell me . . . Buckmaster of the Philadelphia office, aren't you?"

The salesman corrected him and asked: "Can I see you a minute—"

"Not now, not, now

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my dear fellow. This is too important. Go on, get your hoses inside the building, you . . . . you twerps!" The last sentence was addressed in a low voice to the distant firemen.

A policeman approached with a pad in hand. He said: "Oh, Mr. Thurtle—"

"Yes? Yes? Oh, hello, Bill. What—"

"There was an alarm sent out for a gang of pyromaniacs that's terrorizing northern New Jersey," said the cop. "They burned a truck and a coupla houses, and they knocked a cop unconscious at the George Washington Bridge. I was wondering if they mightn't have something to do with this—"

"Yes. No. Dear me, I don't know. I'm too upset, officer."

"O. K., Mr. Thurtle," said the cop and wandered off.

Then there were sudden cries from the crowd. A crew of firemen were advancing on a doorway with a hose which they played through the aperture, when a large figure in shapeless gray garments came out that door from the burning building. The stream of water from the hose struck the figure squarely, but instead of knocking him back into the building as it should have done, it gave a colossal hiss and turned into a vast cloud of steam. Some witnesses, including Clem Buckminster, had a glimpse of the gray figure dodging out of the steam cloud and vanishing around the corner of the building.

"Good gracious," said Thurtle. "What—"

Buckminster cried: "That's what I wanna see you about, Mr. Thoitle! This here is Carl Grinnig, who got the foist lesson in that new course of yours!"

"Oh." Comprehension dawned in Thurtle's eyes, and he followed the salesman unprotesting.

When they were out of earshot of the spectators, Buckminster gave a brief account of events.

"This is terrible!" exclaimed Thurtle. "Mr. Grinnig, you should never have tried an incantation before—"

"How was *I* to know—" protested Grinnig.

"You couldn't; it was partly my fault, too. I should never have put out that course. The only reason I did it was that I hated to see all that powerful scientific knowledge going to waste, and I did want to put one over on our competitors. I got hold of a copy of Paracelsus' *'Ex Libris de Nymphis, Sylvanis, etc.'*; not the abridgment published by Nissensis of Danzic in 1566, which omits all the effective spells, but the last original— Well, that's water over the dam; the question is, what'll we do?"

"I was just gonna ask you that," said Buckminster.

"Yes, yes, I suppose so. It's a difficult problem. From what you've told me, the Rolamander is practically indestructible by physical means; water and bullets don't bother him in the least."

"How about freezing him?" asked Grinnig.

"I don't know; I think you'd practically have to incase him in an iceberg. He gets his energy from the fire world."

Buckminster here suggested: "Maybe we could lure him into a big refrigerator and shut the door!"

"Not likely; he's too crafty."

"We could call out the army," said Grinnig hopefully. "They could bomb him."

"Perhaps; but by the time we convinced them, he'd have found a way to let his fellow hellions into this world."

Buckminster asked: "What does he wanna do that for?"

"To burn everything combustible, I suspect. And don't ask me why they want to burn things. They just do."

"Unreasonable sorta guys," commented the little salesman.

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"Not necessarily; it's that their scale of moral values is entirely different from ours. We can't understand them. Fire's a good servant but an ill master, you know. Let's see; let's see. The printed nigromancy course is no more; the first two volumes were all in the printshop, except for Grinnig's copy, and those that weren't burned up will be ruined by the water. The manuscript in the typesetting room went, too, I fancy. There remains only my copy of the manuscript. Neither we nor Mr. Arson want that destroyed; we want to use it to banish him, and he wants to use it to invoke his fellow Rolamanders. But if he finds us with it, he'll force us to perform the conjuration spell on pain of a horrible death, since he can't handle the papers himself without burning them."

Buckminster asked: "Couldn't we pretend to do the conjuring spell, but really do the banishing spell?"

"That's the trouble; he'd know in a minute we were trying to fool him, and with his fiery disposition you can imagine what would happen. These spells aren't simple things that you can say 'hocus pocus' and the elemental vanishes, you know. Since he escaped from Grinnig's control, we'd have to get him back into a servile state first, and I confess I'm not sure how to do it. Dear, dear, dear. Oh, what's he wearing?"

"An asbestos fire fighter's suit," responded Buckminster.

"Aha, now perhaps—" Thurtle broke off and stared past the other two men, horror growing in his face.

"Ha!" The rasping monosyllable and the feeling of warmth on their backs told Buckminster and Grinnig that their enemy was behind them. "Foolish wights, I grow weary of these pastimes. Fetch me forthwith a set of the rest of those books!"

Thurtle spoke: "I . . . I'm sorry, Mr. Arson, but they're all destroyed. No, no, don't blame us, old fellow; you started the fire yourself!"

"So I did," grinned Arson. "But I know something of the habits of ye of the Cold World. Do not try to tell me that all copies of the work were burned up; you would have an extra somewhere. Lead me to it, and attempt no stratagems such as burning it, unless you wish a speedy but painful death."

"I swear there are no more copies!" cried Thurtle. But Arson simply grinned more widely and began to toss his salamander meaningfully from hand to hand.

"Will you lead me to it, for the last time?" purred the elemental.

"I tell you it doesn't ex—" That was as far as Julian Thurtle got, for the salamander swooped at him and ignited one end of his magnificent mustache. Thurtle, with a small shriek, clapped a hand to smother the blaze. When he removed the hand, the right side of the mustache was intact, but of the left wing only a short black stubble on the upper lip remained. The salamander whirled in a small circle around the dean's head.

"All right," groaned Thurtle. "Follow me."

He led them for several blocks into a grimy district whose buildings were largely devoted to the sale of raw materials, chemicals, and agricultural and industrial machinery. There were few people on the depressing street, most of the people who did business in this neighborhood having gone home to supper.

"Hasten," growled Arson, "for it grows dark, and I cannot wander abroad in this village at night with my face lighting the way like a beacon." His face was in fact becoming pretty conspicuous, though the sun would not set for another hour.

Thurtle stopped the procession

in front of an old wooden frame building bearing the sign:

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Buckminster almost asked why the devil Thurtle chose to keep the spare copy of his manuscript in such a place, but thought better of it. Thurtle himself said: "Wait here, Mr. Arson, and I'll get the papers."

"Ha, so think you. I'll come with you—"

"Oh, no, you won't, unless you want to set this house on fire, too! Then there really wouldn't be any more copies."

"Very well," grumbled the fire elemental. "I will keep these two as hostages. Do you but attempt a spell behind my back, I shall know, and do them most horribly die!"

Thurtle darted into the building, called, "Tom!" and ran up the stairs.

Buckminster and Grinnig remained uneasily with Arson, who had taken up his statuesque pose in front of the doorway. Buckminster was badly frightened; he was sure that Thurtle was up to something, that it might not work, and that Arson would take it out on him and Grinnig. Maybe the old boy would destroy the manuscript, which would prevent further invocations of elementals, but would leave the invulnerable and vindictive Arson abroad in this world. Buckminster clenched his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering.

A window creaked overhead. Carl Grinnig was too far gone to look up. Clem Buckminster would ordinarily have done so had not the crisis given his otherwise mediocre wits a preternatural sharpness. He fought to control his eyes and face, lest he betray his knowledge of things taking place on the second-story level.

There was a brilliant white flare of light.

Several persons claimed afterward to have seen what happened, but they saw from a distance of a block or more, did not begin to notice until the process was well under way, and told stories differing so widely from each other and from the version of Julian Thurtle, an eminent and respected citizen, that not much credence was given these stories.

The flare was caused by the lighting of a magnesium ribbon stuck in the top of a bucket of gray powder, which Thurtle and his acquaintance, Tom Gibbon, had lowered on a wire from the upstairs window until it was a foot or so over Arson's unsuspecting head. Right after the flash the bottom of the bucket fell out, and a cascade of blindingly incandescent material poured down over Arson while the elemental was just beginning to look up to see what was going on.

Buckminster and Grinnig staggered back, shielding their faces from the scorching heat and blinding light. Buckminster blinked for a few seconds before he could see anything at all.

Where Arson had stood was a shapeless thing about half the stature of a man, which sank and slumped and ran out, across the sidewalk, up and down the gutter, spreading scintillating whiteness over an area twenty feet across. The glare dimmed to a mere yellow that could be looked at directly without scorching the eyeballs, and Julian Thurtle from the upstairs window called: "Fire! You, Buckmaster, turn in the alarm!" In truth, the front of Williams & Gibbon's building had begun to burn; little flames ran up the door posts in businesslike fashion.

An alarm had already been turned in; in a few minutes a fire truck extended a ladder up to the window. Thurtle and Gibbon scrambled down it, slightly smoke-blackened but otherwise unhurt.

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"No, no, no, thank you," Thurtle said to those who helped him off the ladder and asked if he wanted hospitalization. "I'm not hurt, really. Perhaps this poor boy, who tried to get up the stairs to us—" He indicated Grinnig, who displayed several minor burns from his previous experiences.

"Naw," said Grinnig. He grinned and tugged Thurtle and Buckminster aside. "Hey, doc," he said to the former, "whad ya do to the guy?"

"I melted him," said Thurtle.

"What with?"

"Thermite! Arson thought he was pretty hot, but you bet he wasn't as hot as that thermite! I knew Williams & Gibbon had some thermite on their place, and I got Tom Gibbon to help me with the bucket and the fuse.

"That's all, except that if you fellows take my advice you won't try to tell anyone about Arson or the nigromancy course—which is all gone now anyway—or your adventures today. I'm going to forget the course and stick that manuscript away in a sort of private time capsule."

"I getcha, boss," said Buckminster. "Say, Carl, hadn't we better stop in at a drugstore and smear some of that tannic-acid junk on ya boins?"

Grinnig looked at his blackened hands. "The main thing I want is yust to get washed up."

"O. K., this here joint oughta have a washroom. And while we're fixing you up, I'll tell you all about our swell new course on how to be an aviation mechanic. We'll have to switch you to a new one, and you wanna make some real dough, don'tcha? O. K. Hey, wassamatta, Carl? I didn't say nothing! HELP!"

Sock!

THE END.

BOOK REVIEW

THE BOOKS OF CHARLES FORT, with an introduction by Tiffany Thayer. Published for the Fortean Society by Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1941; $4.00.

Charles Fort spent a lifetime collecting facts that could not be fitted into any known pattern, facts that didn't make coherent sense. Oppressed by a need to break down the average man's firm belief that he—or at least the professional scientists—knew everything, Fort collected also a noble mass of data relating to instances where scientists had slipped. His books consist then of three essential elements; a collected and semisorted mass of facts that don't fit modern patterns of knowledge. Second, a collection of errors and slips made by scientists through the last century or so, to prove that there *are* things beyond our knowledge. The third division of material might be called Fort's vague and rather cloudy effort to find some sort of pattern in the material. Fort, like any other man faced with that enormous collection of indigestible nonsense-fact was driven to seek a pattern of some sort. From the appearance of things, he could not find the clue facts, or the clue facts haven't been observed yet; his suggested pattern doesn't make satisfactory sense.

Generally, the attitude of the layman has been taken from that of the scientist about twenty years earlier—at the time when the average adult of that particular period was being educated. At the time of Fort's own education, science was convinced of its own all-knowingness, and Fort carried that background into his works. That was the time when physicists were saying that the next generation of scientists would have to devote their time to a mere determining of the next decimal place.

In all, Fort's valuable work is marred by the attitude toward professional science which was implanted in him before the turn of the century. That high-and-mighty, we're-infallible attitude embittered him and colored his writing. It did not color his facts, because he simply amassed all the facts he could find which science had not found a place for—and so stated.

Fort's important work was in collecting in one place this mass of the still unco-ordinated, normally observed facts of nature. It is a typical prescience collection without classification, on the same order as the very early cyclopedias of biology that classified all animals that lived in the water—from beaver and otter to codfish and lobster—in one group.

Unquestionably, Fort's collected facts are important. Only—no one yet has been able to find out just how or why, or what they mean. They are, in other words, a perfectly magnificent source-book and challenge to writers and readers of fantasy. "The Books of Charles Fort" is four complete books—"The Book Of The Damned," "New Lands," "Lo!" and "Wild Talents" in one big eleven-hundred-page volume. It probably averages one science-fiction or fantasy plot idea to the page. And—if only we could find the pattern hidden there among the vast jumble of facts—it probably contains the root truths of about four new sciences.

J. W. C., Jr.

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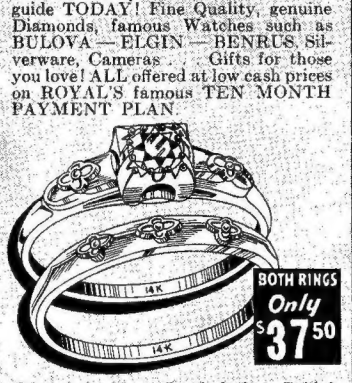

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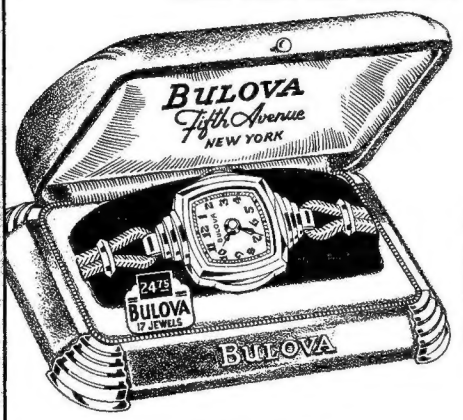

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